

Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?, Vol. 12

**Fujino Omori
Suzuhito Yasuda**

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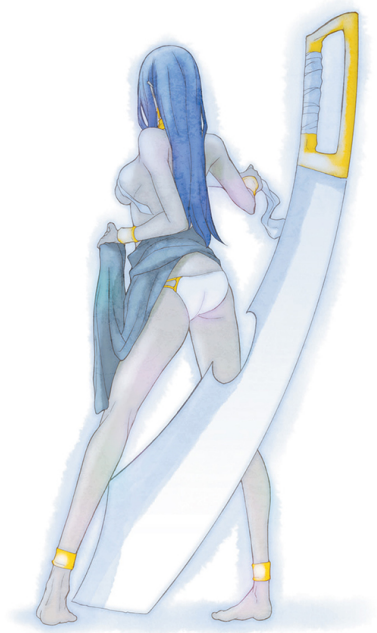
FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA

12

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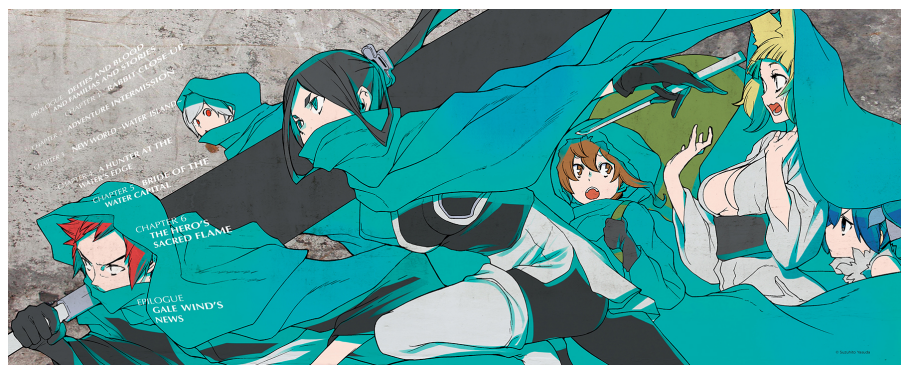


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VOLUME 12

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?, Volume 12
FUJINO OMORI

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Character & Story

Prologue: Deities and Blood and Familias and Stories

Chapter 1: Rabbit Close-Up

Chapter 2: Adventure Intermission

Chapter 3: New World ~Water Island~

Chapter 4: A Hunter at the Water's Edge

Chapter 5: Bride of the Water Capital

Chapter 6: The Hero's Sacred Flame

Epilogue: Gale Wind's News

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

BELL CRANELL

The hero of the story, who came to Orario (sneaking of meeting a beautiful heroine in the Dungeon) under the advice of his grandfather. He belongs to Hestia Familia and is still getting used to his job as an adventurer.



HESTIA

A being from the heavens, she is far beyond all the inhabitants of the mortal plane. The head of Bell's Hestia Familia, she is absolutely head over heels in love with him!

LILLILUKA ERDE

A girl belonging to a race of pygmy humans known as puma, she plays the role of supporter in Bell's battle party. A member of Hestia Familia, she's much more powerful than she looks.



AIZ WALLENSTEIN

Known as the Sword Princess, her combination of feminine beauty and incredible strength makes her Orario's greatest female adventurer. Bell idolizes her. Currently Level 6, she belongs to Loli Familia.

WELF CROZZO

A smith who fights alongside Bell as a member of his party, he forged Bell's light armor (Pronkchi MICV). Belongs to Hestia Familia.



MIKOTO YAMATO

A girl from the Far East. She feels indebted to Bell after receiving his forgiveness. Belongs to Hestia Familia.

HARUHIIME SANJOUNO

A forger who learned from the Far East who met Bell in Orario's Prisoner Quarter. Belongs to Hestia Familia.



EINA TULLE

A Dungeon advisor and a receptionist for the organization in charge of regulating the Dungeon, the Guild. She has bought armor for Bell in the past, and she looks after him both officially and personally.

TSUBAKI COLLBRANDE

A half-dwarf smith belonging to Hephaistos Familia. Currently at Level 5, Tsubaki is a terror on the battlefield.

BETE LOGA

A member of a race of animal people known as werewolves. He laughed at Bell's inexperience one night at The Benevolent Mistresses. However, he recognized the boy's potential after witnessing Bell's battle with a minotaur.

FINN DEIMNE

Known for his cool head, he is the captain of Loli Familia.

TIONA HYRUTE

Amazonian adventurer who calls her self Aiz's best friend. Tiona's younger twin sister. A member of Loli Familia.

OTTAR

An extremely powerful member of Freya Familia.

LYU LEON

An elf and former adventurer of extraordinary skill, she currently works as a bartender and waitress at The Benevolent Mistresses.

ASFI AL ANDROMEDA

A very gifted creator of magical items. She is the captain of Hermes Familia.

TAKEMIKAZUCHI

The deity of Takemikazuchi Familia.

CHIGUSA HITACHI

Another member of Takemikazuchi Familia.

LIDO

A friendly lizardman, he leads the Xenos.

OURANOS

The god in charge of the Guild, he also manages the Dungeon.

AISHA BELKA

A daring, lustful Amazon in Hermes Familia. Formerly a member of Ishtar Familia.

CASSANDRA ILLION

Like Daphne, she joined Mach Familia after Apollo Familia's defeat. She's attached to Daphne, who is caring toward her.

HEPHAISTOS

Deity of Orario's most well-known and respected family of smiths, Hephaistos Familia. She and Hestia have been inseparable since their time in the heavens.

LOKI

Deity of Orario's most powerful familia and has a mysterious western accent. Loki is particularly fond of Aiz.

RIVERIA LLOS ALF

High elf and vice commander of the most prominent familia in Orario, Loli Familia.

TIONE HYRUTE

Older sister of the Amazonian twins. Madly in love with the captain, Finn. A member of Loli Familia.

FREYA

Goddess at the head of Freya Familia. Her stunning allure is strong enough to enchant the gods themselves. She is a true "Goddess of Beauty."

SYR FLOWER

A waitress at The Benevolent Mistresses. She established a friendly relationship with Bell after an unexpected meeting.

HERMES

The deity of Hermes Familia. A charming god who excels at twisting the line on all sides of an argument, he is always in the know. Is he keeping tabs on Bell for someone.....?

MACH

The head of Mach Familia, a group focused on the production and sale of poisons and other recovery items.

OUKA KASHIMA

The captain of Takemikazuchi Familia.

WIENE

A voracious girl Bell meets in the Colossal Tree Labyrinth of the Dungeon. Can speak.

REI

A beautiful siren, she's Xenos's third in command.

FELS

A mage shrouded in mystery who answers to Oranox directly.

DAPHNE LAULOS

Former member of Apollo Familia, along with Cassandra. Joined Mach Familia after Apollo Familia lost the War Game.

CHARACTER & STORY

The Labyrinth City Orario—a large metropolis that sits over an expansive network of underground tunnels and caverns known as the "Dungeon." Bell Cranel came to pursue his dream of becoming an adventurer. After meeting the goddess Hestia, he joined her familia and began to spend his days in the Dungeon, hoping to win the respect of his idol, the Sword Princess Aiz Wallenstein. Soon the supporter Lilly, the smith Welf, the Far Easterner Mikoto, and the renart Haruhime have joined Hestia Familia alongside him. When Bell fights a ferocious battle with his greatest rival, the minotaur Asterios, he instantly becomes the talk of the town. Before he knows it, he's received a mission from the Guild—he must go on an expedition! With his companions at his side, Bell is soon facing new floors, new monsters, and new unknowns...

A grayscale illustration of a hand with the index finger pointing upwards towards a small, white, flame-like object. The object has a dark, smoky trail behind it, suggesting it is moving or has just been released. The hand is rendered with soft shading, and the flame-like object has a delicate, almost ethereal appearance.

PROLOGUE **DEITIES AND BLOOD AND
FAMILIAS AND STORIES**



PROLOGUE

DEITIES AND BLOOD AND FAMILIAS AND STORIES

A single drop of blood fell, setting off ripples.

A thousand long years ago, this was called a ceremony.

A mortal vessel would receive the droplet from a deity, then begin their climb toward the next level. Some said this ritual was the key to grasping the future, providing people with the strength needed to crush evil and overcome great challenges.

But the gods heard that story and laughed, saying there was no need to overcomplicate things.

The blood was a stimulant, merely a trigger. It released the potential that was shut away within mortals, unlocking limitless abilities that even the gods could not foresee. These mortals were the ones who carried themselves along unending paths, overcame cresting waves, withstood torrential rain, and faced storms head-on. They were the ones who pulled their oars through the vast sea as they journeyed to places beyond the horizon.

One deity apologized, saying it was wrong to push their Wills upon the children.

One deity dodged the issue, saying that all parents found happiness in watching their children grow.

One deity prayed for a hero to shoulder the burden of the appointed era.

Across the ages, many deities bled their fingers and, with their own designs in mind, drizzled their blood onto the world.

Ever since long ago and still to this day...

After the falling droplet set off ripples of light, the human's skin trembled like the surface of a pool of water as it was splashed with ichor. All at once, black characters danced across the flesh. The flitting symbols looked exactly like the words of an oracle floating within a sacred flame. One by one, as a slender finger traced them, they became part of a carved seal that resembled an epitaph.

Hieroglyphs.

Using excelia—the invisible chronicle of the children—in place of ink, the hand of the deity induced the Falna to sublime into a new form.

As if she was writing down a new story.

As if she was turning to the next page.

She enjoyed this sensation. Her heart danced indescribably as the fragments of a tale filled the blank page. It was her special privilege to be the first to read the story. It was a treasure that no one could steal from her. This was a special time, a moment of her personal, unique connection with the boy. More than anything, that was what she held dear.

Like a child whose eyes glittered as she listened to a fairy tale, she smiled faintly at the orbit of the story's star.

And then she turned to a fresh page.

Drawn on his back, the true names of the deity and her familia members glimmered subtly alongside their symbol, a flame.

Finally, she stopped moving her hand and pulled away from his back.

Having finished penning the story, the goddess spoke with emotion, as if letting out a breath she had held for a long time within her breast.

“Congratulations, Bell...You’ve leveled up.”



CHAPTER
1
CHAPTER
1

RABBIT CLOSE-UP
RABBIT CLOSE-UP

CHAPTER 1

RABBIT CLOSE-UP

“Thank you.”

Bell rose and bowed to Hestia.

“So it took, what, two months for you to go from Level Three to Level Four? Last time it was one month, so leveling up is getting steadily harder...but wow, your growth is truly astounding.”

“Uh...sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

Hestia and Bell were inside one of the rooms within Hearthstone Manor. Bell had been sitting on the edge of a bed while Hestia updated his status until he rose to take the stat sheet from Hestia before sitting back down. She lowered herself beside him. As he looked over the Koine text, his expression remained calm and quiet—or rather, earnest.

He hadn’t shown any sign of surprise at hearing he’d leveled up, either.

Perhaps he’d sensed it would happen—a feeling that his vessel would rise to the next stage.

After all, he had made it through a life-or-death struggle with his greatest rival.

“Bell.”

“Yes?”

“That black minotaur...Asterios, right? Was he...strong?”

“...Yes.”

He nodded as if lost in thought.

The Guild had determined that the potential of the black minotaur—officially, it had been designated a subspecies of black rhino, a creature found in the deep levels—was Level 7. They’d recorded it as a first-class bounty monster based on the fact that during its rampage through the city, it had fought numerous adventurers, including some members of *Loki Familia*, making it as dangerous as a Monster Rex.

Bell hadn’t taken Asterios down, but he was the only one to fight him head-on. A Level-3 adventurer took on a Level-7 monster and had come back alive. Without a doubt, it was a tremendous achievement. There certainly seemed to be adequate justification for Bell’s leveling

up, even though he had lost to Asterios.

But in this boy's case...

Hestia reflected on the current situation. The defeat might have meant something exceptional to Bell. Just as Freya had said at the most recent Denatus, some excelia had a special meaning, and this was one of those cases. As Hestia looked at the sitting boy whose eyes were downcast as if recalling a memory, she couldn't help but feel that was the case. The rematch with the minotaur had drawn out his potential. *Fate* was an apt word to describe it.

Of course, the groundwork for leveling up had been laid before the fight with Asterios. There had been Bell's struggle with *Ishtar Familia*, his steady progress to reach the twentieth floor of the Dungeon, and then his battle against the violent hunters over the Xenos. There was no doubt about it—ever since he reached Level 3, he had been continuously accumulating high-grade excelia that was essential to leveling up.

The battle with Asterios had only been the final push.

“...Anyway, about your status...As usual, the count for your basic abilities has been reset, so the numbers start from zero again. There was only one development ability to choose when you leveled up, so I went ahead and gave it to you. Was that okay?”

“Yes, that's fine.”

“Also, you've probably already noticed, but...you have a new skill.”

Hestia had shaken off her meditative mood and was updating Bell on his Level-4 status. He nodded firmly, as if he was receiving something important, but that was all. Hestia shifted her gaze to his back.

Bell Cranell

Level 4

Power: IO Defense: IO Dexterity: IO Agility: IO Magic:

IO Luck: G Immunity: H Escape: I

Magic

Firebolt

- **Swift-strike magic**

Skills

Liaris Freese

- **Rapid growth**
- **Continued desire results in continued growth**
- **Stronger desire results in stronger growth**

Argonaut

- **Charges automatically with active action**

Ox Slayer

- **When fighting minotaurs, all abilities are exponentially enhanced**

To start with, his new development ability was Escape.

According to information provided by the Guild, this ability greatly enhanced speed during evasive maneuvers. More simply put, it allowed the user to make a quick exit. It only appeared at Level 4 or higher, and it was rare...but on the other hand, it was considered dishonorable because it manifested only in adventurers who had shown a truly extraordinary propensity for running away in the past.

Thinking back on it, ever since the time he was a Level-1 adventurer all the way to the present, Bell had always been chased by something. From the minotaur and the silverback to *Apollo Familia* and *Ishtar Familia*, Bell Cranell's story was a timeline of escapes.

Hestia knew that, and she accepted that this ability had manifested for Bell. She did have some thoughts on the subject, but in the end, development abilities were rare and it was important to take whatever was available.

She was more interested in the third skill.

Ox Slayer was a slayer-type skill, meaning it could be used only against a specific type of enemy.

By this point, there was little need to explain why it had appeared. It was the boy's instinct, potential, and sheer will, made manifest through the mortal struggle with his old adversary. In all likelihood, the skill would allow Bell to draw on battle abilities well beyond his level whenever he fought Asterios or other minotaur-type monsters. It would make Bell an Ox Slayer in both name and reality.

Hestia had been silently examining the status sheet, but now she slowly shifted her gaze away from it.

“...”

Bell looked as if he had finally come to his senses.

Unlike when he had leveled up in the past, this time he hadn't romped around like an excited little kid. But even though his expression was calm, he had forgotten to put his clothes back on, and his eyes were practically burning a hole in the sheet. Having accepted his new strength, he was completely absorbed in his thoughts, as if he was reflecting on some distant scene.

Hestia had never seen him look like this before.

He's changed, she thought to herself.

The same single-minded desire to “grow stronger” still emanated powerfully from his body. But the feelings and meaning contained in those words had changed.

He had shed a skin, broken through his shell.

Perhaps that was the way to describe it.

“You’re really...just getting cooler and cooler.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing, never mind.”

Unlike the unchanging deities, Bell did evolve, and Hestia would have been lying if she said that didn’t make her a little bit lonely. But that feeling was outweighed by pure joy—both as a patron deity and a girl—over the boy’s growth.

“Hey Bell, listen to this.”

“...?”

“I have this other name that’s a symbol for what I do and also kind of like a title...Vesta.”

“Vesta...”

“Right. In the language of the deities, it means ‘sacred flame.’”

“...Why are you telling me this now?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I looked at you and I just wanted to tell you.”

Bell looked up, and Hestia narrowed her eyes and grinned a little. Still sitting next to him on the bed, she turned her gaze toward the ceiling, squeezed her eyes shut, and let the smile spread over her face.



The sound of footsteps echoes through the air on a gentle wind.

Under a blue sky, Orario is neither too hot nor too cold. The temperature is perfectly comfortable. The height of summer has passed, and the breeze that brushes against my skin brings a hint of still-distant autumn. Soon it’ll be harvest season.

That’s where my thoughts go as I gaze out at the landscape beyond the city parapets—a scene of green forests, wide-open grasslands, and modest mountains.

Once again, I’m atop the city walls. For the past few days since my status was updated, my feet have been carrying me here as if by habit.

Or maybe I wanted to send a message down to that underground maze where my promises and my final fight await...to declare that I’ve leveled up, and now my feet are starting to move in earnest.

“...In order to move forward, do I need to rest?”

Rest your body and soul well.

That’s what Hestia said to me after the Xenos incident came to a close.

I pushed myself relentlessly for ten days after *Ikelos Familia* initially stirred up trouble. Now that I’m free from that upheaval, I’ve given myself over to peace and relaxation. That’s part of an

adventurer's job, too. The goddess was right when she said that a warrior's rest is very important. Thanks to her advice, my body is well on its way to full recovery.

Aside from my own physical state, a lot of my weapons and equipment were half-destroyed or lost altogether. Right now, our smith, Welf, is swamped with the work of fixing and replacing everything—although he sounded very happy when he told me this was an opportunity to craft new things. So this is also a period of preparation as I wait for my new gear to be ready.

Honestly, though, I can't sit still.

I promised myself I'd get stronger, and that vow is roaring in my chest.

But for now, it's like the goddess said—I should be resting. I've got to hold back my impatient heart and build myself up for the coming challenges. I recall the image of my opponent's black back heading toward the Dungeon and look down at my palms.

...I feel strange.

I'm terribly calm, and this calmness strikes me as odd. In the past, I would have been restless at a time like this, searching for something to do and rushing desperately forward. But right now, I'm so calm and collected I surprise even myself.

When that worthy opponent beat me, regret and frustration overwhelmed me, and I cried pitifully. But after that, something seemed to change inside me.

And speaking of changes...

Ever since that day, my surroundings have changed a bit as well.

First of all, the harsh treatment I was getting from the townsfolk has softened considerably. The change isn't as dramatic as it was after I dominated the War Game, but at the very least I'm not the target of quite as much criticism and disdain. Lilly says the townsfolk started to see me differently after they witnessed my battle...and it's true that people greet me more often out on the streets now, especially those hot-blooded dwarves.

The biggest shock was when Lai and the other kids from the orphanage visited our home. To my surprise, Maria led them to our front door, where they apologized to me. The children said their thanks, too. *We're sorry we said all those bad things, thank you for saving us, you were so cool...* I would be lying if I said I wasn't happy to hear Lai and Fina say those earnest words while blushing. But I felt bad at the same time.

Lai and the other kids don't know about the Xenos. They simply think I rescued them from scary monsters. That's true for the townsfolk, too. Lilly happened to be there with me when the kids came, and both of us shared in the same guilt. A wave of dejection

that I can't put into words rose up in my chest. But the half-elf Ruu washed that feeling away.

"Big brother...You were right. Thank you...for fighting for all of us."

He buried his face happily in my stomach, and his words...saved me.

Like the others, he doesn't know a thing about the Xenos. But to me, it sounded almost like he was affirming the existence of Wiene and Lido and all the others. There were definitely tears in my eyes as I quietly hugged him and returned him to the group.

"..."

Now, I stand here on the city walls thinking back on that scene while enjoying the sensation of the wind blowing between the parapet and the path. Slowly, I turn around.

I sense a presence and hear the footsteps of two people. A moment later my visitors appear at the top of the steps leading to the upper level of the wall.

"Hey there, Bell."

"Sir Hermes..."

The god with yellow-orange hair is with his follower Asfi. He lightly tips his feathered traveler's cap in greeting.

Just then, I notice something.

"Um...What is that red mark on your face? It looks like someone kicked you..."

"I stopped by your home on my way here...Ha-ha, when I met Hestia she drop-kicked me."

I break into a sweat at the unexpected mention of a dropkick right as Asfi lets out a sigh. Hermes—with the imprint of Hestia's foot clear on his handsome face—laughs hollowly. But it's easy for me to guess why Hestia acted so violently.

"Bell—I'm sorry."

As if he's read my mind, Hermes straightens his back and apologizes to me. Then he holds his cap to his chest and bows, looking for all the world like a nobleman. I stare at him. Asfi seems surprised, too, apparently not expecting this, either.

"I wanted to apologize about the incident with the Xenos. I used Gros and the other monsters even though I knew it would hurt you."

Five days ago, after sending off Wiene and the others, I fought against Gros and the winged Xenos. I know now that was part of Hermes's plot. He backed the Xenos into a corner and hoped I would destroy them. No doubt Hestia attacked Hermes when he showed his face at our home because she was mad about his scheming.

But Hermes doesn't tell me why he did it. All he says is, "Do you hate me?"

“...I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “I can’t forgive what you did to Gros and the others...but you’ve saved the goddess and me many times in the past. I...don’t know what to think.”

Was he simply acting with the capriciousness typical of a deity and enjoying the situation as a welcome distraction? If he claimed that, I might believe him. But instincts say that he wasn’t helping us and acting behind the scenes merely to amuse himself. I think he was acting in line with a certain ideal or his own Will.

Hermes rises from his bow and smiles at my response.

“If you don’t forgive me, that’s fine, too. You don’t need to understand me. But—I’m probably going to keep on meddling in your life. I know you might resent me for it now, and later as well.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Well...because I’m a fan of yours.”

I’ve heard that phrase somewhere before. But right now, the expression on Hermes’s face isn’t his typical gentle smile. Instead, his narrowed eyes and upturned corners of his mouth remind me of a deity looking down on his children from the heavens.

“Anyhow, I’ve done what I came to do. I wanted to take responsibility for my evil plot now that I’ve been exposed. I’ve already made my appearance before Hestia, too, so I’ll take my leave.”

He replaces his cap on his head and turns away from me. Then, like a temperamental wind, he leaves.

“Bell Cranell...If you can look at things rationally, I ask you to not hate him.”

Asfi has remained behind, and for a moment, she gazes at the receding figure of her patron deity like a mother minding a troublesome child.

“Despite what he did, he was worried about you,” she says before bowing and turning on her heels.

I watch the two of them disappear down the stairs. Just then, as if taking their place, another visitor arrives.

“—Well, well. I never guessed my visit would coincide with the god Hermes’s.”

“Fels...”

“I see you’ve guessed it’s me. I seem to have poor timing, as the deities like to say.”

Shrugging off a veil, the black-clad mage materializes from thin air. Fels is wearing a black hood that hides the wearer’s face and gloves of the same color. The ghostly mage turns toward me, still about five paces away.

“Were you hiding all this time?”

“Yes...I thought I’d probably fly into a rage if I came face-to-face with Hermes, so I waited until they left.”

I sure am getting a lot of visitors today.

It seems Fels hasn't forgiven Hermes, either. It may be dislike, or perhaps it's more accurate to say that the mage is filled with complicated feelings toward the god. In any case, Hermes seems to be earning himself a lot of ill will. The image of his wryly smiling face and slightly pained words rises in my memory.

The black robe quivers as if its wearer is sighing, then Fels's gaze falls on me.

"Now that everything is finally wrapped up, I came to see how you were doing. Are you feeling like your old self again?"

"Yes."

"...Your expression has changed quite a bit. The news of your level-up to Level Four just arrived at the Guild...To me, you look nothing like the Bell from several days ago—although of course I don't have eyeballs," the skeleton jokes, peering at me in admiration.

So it's like I'm a completely different person...Is that really true? I certainly can't tell.

What I am sure of is that the desire to get stronger blazes much more fiercely within my chest than it did before.

"Bell Cranell, can I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

Fels pauses for a moment, then speaks slowly.

"Have you decided...what to do next?"

"..."

I remain silent. In order to catch up with my idol, to keep my promise to Wiene, to settle matters with my rival...I know what I need to do. I've already decided. But it takes me a few seconds to put it into words.

"I'm planning to go into the Dungeon again. So I can...become stronger."

As the wind whistles around the towering city wall, Fels stares at me. The gaze I give in return doesn't waver. The mage nods.

"You seem to have made up your mind...But I also detect a hint of indecision."

"..."

"I don't want you to die. Just like Lido said in the Hidden Village, that's my honest wish. And for that reason, I intend to meddle in your affairs a bit—although I may not be able to completely eliminate your hesitation."

The black-clad mage quietly lifts one hand.

"Bell Cranell, I'm going to give you a reason to fight."

Fels points beyond my feet, at the landscape spread out far, far below.

"You must clear the deepest floor of the Dungeon. If you don't do

that, the human race and the Xenos will never be able to coexist.”

“...!”

Fels continues speaking as I stand stock-still, staring.

“Of course, Ouranos and I will continue to help them...but in the end, if you can’t manage this, then the future we both hope for is not likely to arrive.”

The deepest floor of the Dungeon.

It takes a minute for the words to penetrate every corner of my being and for me to comprehend them.

Slowly, I open my mouth to speak.

“What...is on the deepest floor of the Dungeon?”

What is the Dungeon? I’ve posed that very question to the goddess before. Fels answers me in a quiet voice.

“Your vow...and how you’ll settle your battle.”

The words, so quiet they are nearly drowned out by the wind, drop in the space between us.

Fels hasn’t explained the reason why I need to clear the deepest floor of the Dungeon, nor how that’s connected to the Xenos. The only thing that’s been revealed is the hard truth, and the Will that most likely originates from Ouranos.

“Bell Cranell, if you want to help Lido and the other Xenos...then please find a way to keep moving forward.”

“...”

“May the light accompany you on your journey.”

Having finished speaking, Fels shakes out the veil, throws it on, and vanishes from sight. The sound of measured footsteps fades away, and silence descends around me.

Alone on the city walls once again, I turn and stare out at the scene before me. A huge tower brushes against the heavens, and below it, an enormous maze sprawls across the bottom of the earth.



On the thirtieth floor of Babel, the titanic structure at the center of Orario, an abnormal din filled the halls. A Denatus was under way.

Deities young and old, male and female, were attending the so-called advisory council, which was about to begin. All of them had too much time on their hands.

“It’s been a while since the last Denatus, hasn’t it?”

“That’s because right when it was time to hold one, *Ikelos Familia* went and caused all that trouble.”

“Who could possibly host a Denatus in the middle of such a racket?”

The meetings were supposed to take place every three months, but due to events surrounding the Xenos, the latest one had been postponed. Now, after repeated delays, the deities were chatting excitedly as they gathered in the large hall. Some were even stretching in preparation, though there was no reason for it whatsoever.

Hermes isn't here... Well, maybe that's for the best. If I saw him again so soon after his visit, I might drop-kick him again!

Hestia was sitting at an enormous table that could seat fifty. She craned her neck around. She still hadn't forgiven Hermes for what he'd done, and just thinking about it got her worked up. She scanned the faces in the hall. Loki, Freya, Miach, Hephaistos, Takemikazuchi, and Ganesha were all present... Aside from Apollo and Ishtar, who had been banished and sent away, the crowd was almost identical to the one at the last meeting. But a lot had happened in those three months, including the conflicts between her familia and those belonging to Apollo and Ishtar. Hestia couldn't help thinking back on the dizzying swirl of events and reflecting on the richness of time in the mortal plane.

"I am Ganesha!! More importantly, I am the facilitator of this meeting!"

"No way!"

"Ugh, if Ganesha is moderator, I'm going home..."

"Wait, wait, don't be hasty!"

"All righty then! I, Ganesha, will recount the recent events in the city!"

The god in the elephant mask energetically got the meeting started. First came the regular briefing, where information about the city and other locations was exchanged. But despite Ganesha's enthusiasm, the briefing ended almost before it had started.

"Any questions? Speak up—I'm happy to answer any questions you have!" Ganesha prodded. The attendees, however, seemed to want nothing more than to get things over in a hurry. This was depressing to Ganesha, who had devoted himself day and night to maintaining the peace in Orario.

He's not going to mention the Xenos, is he...?

Hestia felt slightly apprehensive about the topic, but it seemed that Ganesha wanted to hold his tongue, too.

"Okay, let's move on to the Naming Ceremony, then..." Ganesha announced spiritlessly. The instant he did, the mood in the room transformed. The deities were suddenly full of life and exploding with excitement.

"Yes, finally!"

"This is what I was waiting for!"

"It's the only reason I showed up today!"

Everyone grabbed copies of the Guild documents that were being passed around the table and eagerly began flipping through them.

The last page was what caught the attention of many in the group. That's where they found the information about the white-haired human, hurriedly updated at the last minute by Guild staff, just like it had been at the last Denatus. The Little Rookie, Bell Cranell.

"I've never seen a kid pop up at the Denatus so many times in a row."

"Yeah, can you believe he leveled up twice, from Level Two to Three and then Four? My goodness."

"Insane!"

Voices rippled out from around the oval table. They were all exuberant, joyful cheers of support. The goddess of beauty smiled sweetly, while the goddess of tricksters narrowed her eyes and hummed a tune.

How was the boy able to grow so rapidly?

None of the deities in attendance uttered such an insensitive question as that. Everyone agreed that someone who had shown himself capable in a decisive fight with the minotaur was worthy of being called a hero. Their grins deepened and spread around the table.

It's okay; it's going to be okay...

Meanwhile, Hestia's expression became stiffer and stiffer as the other deities grew more excited.

Our group is more respectable now, with a big home and everything. Our familia has even leveled up alongside Bell...Yes, things are really different from how they were three months ago...! And my own ability to speak up should be improving, too...!

The young goddess squeezed her hand into a fist. Dripping sweat and struggling with her internal worries, she focused all her energy on avoiding a title that might embarrass Bell.

Soon, the Naming Ceremony would begin in earnest.

"Now then, let's get right to giving Bell his new nickname!"

"Wait, let's save the main dish for last!!"

"Yeah, someone else at Loli's place leveled up, too."

"Yeah, yeah...that Pyonkichi kid, Wel-something-or-other, right?"

"Right, then, we'll start by deciding on a name for Welf Crozzo!"

"Ignis, the Ever Burning."

"Perfect!"

"That's for sure."

"Yes, it's decided!"

"As the boy said himself, 'This is nowhere near enough to quell the fires you stoked in my heart.'"

"Oh, I'm dying!"

"It's just right!"

Just like that, the deities decided on Welf's nickname. Hestia wanted to protect him, but she decided this was better than most alternatives the crowd was likely to come up with and let it go. All the same, it could be quite a blow to Welf...

She glanced diagonally across the table. The goddess of the forge, her close friend, had carelessly boasted about Welf's declaration of love before, and now her words had come back to haunt her. Her eyes were fixed in the opposite direction as she blushed deep red.

"Two people in *Takemikazuchi Familia* leveled up as well."

"The kid from the Far East!"

"I'd say Black Locks is a good one."

"Chigusa Hitachi...She's shy, but I can tell she'd make a good wife."

"How about Love Bird, Takemikazuchi?"

"It's better than Eternal † Shadow!"

The Naming Ceremony proceeded without a hitch, and soon enough, it was Bell's turn. Hestia, who was experiencing déjà vu, inhaled deeply then held her breath.

The other deities were grinning and murmuring that the crucial moment had come. As they exchanged glances as if to ask who would start the debate—the elegant goddess of beauty raised her fresh and youthful arm.

"Might I offer an opinion?"

"...?!"

Freya made a move!!

A murmur passed through the gathering. Not only the terrified Hestia but the Denatus as a whole had reached a peak of nervous tension and excitement.

"What's this? Lady Freya herself is showing interest?"

"So you're a fan of Bell's now, are you?"

"I am indeed. I couldn't help feeling a thrill as I watched that battle."

The notorious Freya had finally laid her eyes on the Little Rookie! This was surely a sign of trouble to come.

The deities, who had no inkling of Freya's true involvement, assumed her interest in the boy to be an inevitable development. After all, Bell Cranell could hardly escape the notice after causing such a stir throughout the city. Some of the deities even suspected the goddess of beauty had developed feelings for the boy and watched in amusement to see what would happen.

Among the crowd, Hestia alone was feeling extremely on edge.

"Freya...I trust you'll choose a good nickname for my Bell," Hestia said with a smile that did not reach her eyes.

"Now, now, Hestia, comments like that only make me more

nervous,” Freya responded, smiling back beatifically. Even the gods, who would normally be teasing the Goddess Loli in a situation like this, were overawed. Had the final battle of Ragnarök finally arrived?

Freya brought one hand to her cheek and put on a great show of hemming and hawing before finally flashing a brilliant grin.

“What do you think of Vanadis Odr, Companion of Vanadis?”

“Hey, Hey, Heeeeeeeeeey!!!”

Hestia slammed both her fists down onto the table with a loud bang and stood up.

“‘Companion,’ my ass! Bell belongs to *my* familia!!”

“What, you didn’t like my suggestion?”

“What the hell is there to like?!”

Everyone knew that Freya was an extremely passionate goddess. For the moment, the deities set aside the question of whether her initial proposal was sincere, a joke, or an attempt to meddle in Hestia’s business and chattered with glee. Her supporters were especially excited to see a display of her queenly behavior once again at a Denatus.

Even though the boy’s patron deity immediately shot down Freya’s suggestion, she showed no sign of being upset. Instead, she smiled mischievously and withdrew her proposal with a sigh and a “Too bad.”

“That’s no good! Vanadis Odr, are you kidding? You’re way too obsessed with sex, and it doesn’t make any sense anyway,” Loki commented with a roar of laughter.

“Okay then, Loki, what’s your suggestion?” Freya countered.

“Hmm, let me think...”

Dramatically ignoring Hestia’s glare, which all but screamed, *Don’t say anything stupid!* Loki raised a finger into the air.

“Fool’s Plaything.”

“Get out of here!!” Hestia shouted with indignation. “Anyway, why should he be *your* plaything?”

Soon, all the other deities were piling onto the nasty party that Freya and Loki had started.

“Yeah, I have an idea! Chestnut Cream!”

“Oh Be-ell! Marry me! How about Wedding Bell?!”

“You just turned eighty percent of the deities in this room against you!”

“That huge smile on Freya’s face is the deadliest look I’ve ever seen!”

“Eeeeeee!”

“Shut up and listen to my song! It’s called ‘Lucky Pyonkichi!’”

“Give it up already!”

“Brave Long-Ears!”

“Youuuu’re trying too hard.”

“He doesn’t even have long ears!”

“Let’s get away from the rabbit theme.”

“Doesn’t he have any other distinguishing features? Like, some other rumor or information about him?”

“Now that I think about it, there was a rumor at one point that the kid was a monster lover.”

“What...?”

“So that means...he’ll go for humans, and he’ll go for monsters... and he’ll even go for us deities?”

“How about All Okay?!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGHHH!!!”

Hestia’s patience had reached its limit. Screaming, she waved both arms in the air. Takemikazuchi and Miach tried to calm her down, but even as they did, the other deities continued to roar with bawdy laughter. Hestia howled with rage. Chaos in the room was reaching a fever pitch.

Finally, someone mentioned it was time to get serious, and the deities put an end to their rowdy jokes. With the help of Miach and Takemikazuchi, Hestia—who was still panting hard—managed to wrench a safe nickname for Bell from the group.

“Shit...They really messed with me.”

After the meeting ended, Hestia threw her head down on the table, completely out of breath. Hephaistos sat beside her, smiling wryly.

“That’s because you’re really moving up in the world these days. It was a kind of baptism, in one sense,” she said.

Perhaps because they had succeeded in teasing the cheeky Goddess Loli, the other deities left the room looking very pleased with themselves. Their number included Freya, who cast a sidelong glance and a smirk at Hestia as she left, as well as Loki, who hugged her stomach and tried to catch her breath after laughing far too hard. Hestia watched them leave with a critical look in her narrowed eyes.

“But in the end, Bell’s honor has been protected...I’d better get back home and tell everybody...Oh, but I just want to rest for a minute...”

Hestia seemed to have expended her last bit of energy waving good-bye to Miach and Takemikazuchi. She looked completely exhausted.

“Hestia, your familia’s rank went up, didn’t it?” Hephaistos asked her.

“Huh? Uh, yeah, when Bell rose to Level Four, our familia went from E to D...But why do you want to know?”

Hestia looked up with a puzzled expression at her friend, the red-

haired, red-eyed goddess sitting next to her. As she had explained, with Bell's improvement, the Guild decided that the familia's fighting strength had increased as well, and consequently raised its level.

Hephaistos shrugged.

"In that case, a notice should be coming soon."

"...A notice?" Hestia asked, tilting her head quizzically.



A large number of demi-humans was jostling in the hall.

The crowd was gathered around the huge bulletin board that stood in one corner of the Guild Headquarters lobby. The adventurers had rushed there as soon as they heard that the Denatus had ended, because the nicknames chosen at the Naming Ceremony would be posted there first. A few curious townsfolk and merchants could even be spotted among the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of the deities' influence.

The instant the Guild staff finished pinning up the list of names, dozens of eyes zeroed in on the cork bulletin board. Sighs of admiration and voices both happy and sad began to rise from the crowd.

"...Oh, look at that."

"I know; I can see for myself!"

Most of the spectators were looking for one nickname in particular. They craned their necks and squinted, reaching out their hands to point. All attention gathered on one name, one adventurer, and the commotion melded into a singular buzz. The animal-person master and servant, the pair of prum sisters standing eagerly on tiptoe, the group of beautiful elves, the ruffian dwarves with scarred faces, and the Amazons licking their lips were all talking about one nickname in particular.

Bell watched the scene from the back of the crowd.

"Oh...Bell Cranell."

The moment someone mumbled his name, all the adventurers turned toward him in unison. Then, having noted his presence, they fell silent, as if it had been arranged beforehand. Bell had just arrived at the bulletin board, and as he stepped toward the front, he realized that he was the center of attention.

"Excuse me, excuse me," he mumbled as the crowd parted to let him pass. He walked down the path that had opened for him, stopped in front of the large wooden board, and looked up at it. He found his name and read the nickname granted him by the deities.

"Rabbit Foot."

That was his new title.

His old nickname, which painted him as a rapidly-growing yet immature rookie, was gone, and in its place was a new one that extolled his appearance and incomparably fast feet, and it was gained in record time to boot!

Some of the adventurers around Bell glared at him with hostility, while others smiled or seemed envious, but everyone recognized the amazing achievements of the record-holding rabbit. Unlike before, when he was ridiculed as a fake, there was no sign of jealousy, and no one considered him an impertinent rookie. There was nothing but praise.

Bell could sense it with his whole body, but he couldn't help feeling embarrassed. He turned toward the reception desk, hoping to escape the crowd and consult with his adviser. He searched out the half-elf from among the receptionists who were looking at him and chattering in girlish voices, but—

“...Miss Eina?”

“...”

The half-elf receptionist just stared at him. It was as if the beautiful emerald eyes behind her glasses were watching some other far-off scene, and her cheeks were as flushed as if she had a cold.

Bell didn't know what to do, since Eina was just standing there motionless.

“Eina, Eina. Mr. Bell is here, look!”

“—!”

Eina gave a start as her coworker Misha poked her. Finally, she looked directly at Bell, but she immediately lost her composure and flushed even redder, sputtering, “Uh, um, oh?!” Uncharacteristically flustered, she withdrew something from the counter.

“B-Bell!...T-take this!”

“Huh?”

She was holding a pure-white sealed letter.

Bell looked back and forth between Eina's face and the letter. Some of the adventurers watching from the sidelines screeched, “No way, Miss Eina wrote a love letter?!” but Bell recoiled in surprise as soon as he took the letter in his hand.

From the feel of the envelope, he could tell right away that the paper was of high quality and the sealing wax was imprinted with the Guild's seal.

Bell had seen a letter like this before. He scanned his memory for the details, and unconsciously his lips moved.

“A mission...?”



 CHAPTER 2
ADVENTURE INTERMISSION

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CHAPTER 2

ADVENTURE INTERMISSION

After Hestia left the Denatus and Bell received the letter at Guild Headquarters, the two met up at a café on Northwest Main Street, which everyone called Adventurers Way.

Sitting directly across the table from Bell was Hephaistos, goddess of the forge, who wore a large patch over one eye. Hestia had been on her way to Hephaistos's northwestern branch store to get more details about "the notice" when she ran into Bell coming from Guild Headquarters. In the end, the three decided to sit down for a cup of tea.

"Hephaistos, is this letter that Bell received what you meant by a notice?" Hestia asked, flapping the white envelope between her fingers. Her friend nodded.

"That's right, Hestia."

It was late afternoon, and the sun was approaching the western city wall. Bell and Hestia asked Hephaistos to explain more about the mission from the Guild.

"Once a Dungeon-exploring familia reaches a certain rank, it has a responsibility to go on expeditions at set intervals—and it has to produce results on those expeditions," she said.

"Expeditions?"

"Yes. The Guild delivers an order, like the one you just received."

Hestia was startled by this news and hurriedly looked over the contents of the letter again. Just as Hephaistos had said, the parchment signed by the head of the Guild declared that their familia had a duty to carry out an expedition.

"Lady Hephaistos, you mentioned a certain rank...?" Bell asked.

"It's rank D or higher, Bell Cranell. The biggest factions like Loki's and Freya's do it regularly. Well, *Loki Familia* goes to the Deep Zone, so they're not pushed to do it all the time."

"And what exactly are the results that we have to produce?"

"You can just improve your Dungeon range by one level, or you can contribute to the discovery of various resources like an unknown mineral, or map a Frontier. It doesn't really matter. I think even defeating a floor boss is sometimes acceptable. Most familias just clear

a new floor they haven't reached yet."

In contrast to his patron deity, Bell seemed to be thinking about something specific as he asked Hephaistos various questions. She gave him a look that said, *What are you up to?* but nevertheless answered in detail.

"The Guild wants unknown areas of the Dungeon to be constantly explored and new resources uncovered. Dungeon-type familias only exist in this city, and if you want to call yourself one, then the Guild demands that you have something to show for it."

"I-I didn't know that..."

Hestia seemed as if she had received a minor shock. Given the Guild's history and the fact that it held the real power over the only dungeon in the world, it made sense that its ultimate goal was to explore and understand the subterranean maze that sprawled beneath their feet. These as-yet-unknown resources, territories, and discoveries would of course be closely connected to the future development of Orario. That was why the Guild made things like adventurer registration so convenient. Unlike commercial familias, Dungeon familias didn't have to fill out any complicated paperwork, and the taxes collected by the Guild weren't too high, either.

When Hestia started out, she had not felt any preferences for a particular sort of faction, and she made the decision to register as a Dungeon-type familia quite lightly, figuring a small-scale familia would be just right for her.

"I wish Miach or somebody had told me about this before I registered..."

"No one thought you'd ever make it to rank D. I honestly didn't expect it, either. Who would've guessed that you'd rocket to the top this fast..."

Hephaistos smiled wryly at Hestia and shot a sidelong glance at Bell.

For his part, Bell knew he was the catalyst of all this. He pressed his right hand to his temple, feeling a little guilty. Expeditions were required of only upper-class familias—the ones who were able to explore the depths of the Dungeon and come back alive. None of this should have affected any weaker groups...At least, that was how it was supposed to be.

"I bet the reason Hermes doesn't report his children's true levels is because he doesn't like expeditions..." Hestia grumbled. As far as she could tell, the condition for completing an expedition-type mission seemed to be making a clear effort. Hermes's smile floated before her eyes as she speculated that this was the reason the gentle god—who preferred a middle-of-the-road position over a prominent rise—falsified the levels of his followers on the public reports.

“Getting back to the subject at hand...What’s important is that your own familia does the expedition. You can hire adventurers from elsewhere, but you can’t simply tag along on someone else’s expedition. Make sure you keep that in mind,” Hephaistos explained, emphasizing the importance of taking independent action.

“And by the way, if you don’t go on an expedition or don’t produce enough results, it’ll be treated as a failure and you’ll be penalized,” she added, wrapping up her lesson. Apparently, the penalty was generally issued as a fine. “That’s about all there is to these expedition missions. Did you have any questions?”

“No...It’s just that this is all so sudden that it hardly feels real. I don’t even know what I don’t know...”

Hestia appeared to still be in shock after hearing her friend’s lecture.

“Miss Aiz...and lots of other upper-class adventurers have succeeded, haven’t they?” Bell asked, looking straight at Hephaistos with his rubellite eyes.

“...That’s right, Bell Cranell,” she responded, squinting at him with her good eye as if she understood everything. Her expression relaxed, and she gave an affirming smile.

“Well, do your best. If you need me, I’ll do what I can to help...I’m here for you,” she said. Then the beautiful goddess in men’s clothing finished her tea, paid the bill, and left. Bell and Hestia looked at each other and nodded.

“At last...an expedition mission.”

Mikoto was sitting in the living room, murmuring contemplatively. Dinner was over, and the whole familia had gathered around Hestia for a meeting. The topic, of course, was what they would do about the expedition.

“When I was with Lady Ishtar, I went on a number of expeditions with Aisha and the others,” Haruhime said as she passed out tea, dressed in a maid’s outfit.

“Lady Hephaistos runs a smithing familia, so we didn’t have to do them...But Tsubaki was so curious she joined other peoples’ expeditions just because she wanted to.” Welf added his experiences while sitting on a chair with his legs crossed.

Bell and Mikoto pulled another seat over for the renart girl, who had finished serving. She thanked them as she sat down.

“Lady Hestia, did you not know that expeditions were required? Didn’t we carry out a small expedition before?”

“Well, uh, we were invited by Takemikazuchi that time...But I guess it wouldn’t be a bad idea to do one now to improve our situation in the future.” Hestia gave a hollow laugh as she avoided

looking at anyone. Lilly glanced at her through narrowed eyes.

“Oh geez.” The prum girl sighed, looking up. “This is just like when we delivered Wiene to the Hidden Village. We essentially have no right to decline the mission. The only way we can get out of it is if the Guild determines that our fighting strength has suffered a major blow or if we were already on an important long-term quest or another mission.”

“And taking on an important quest...would be impossible right now?” Haruhime asked timidly.

“Yes, that would be prohibited.” Lilly summarily discarded the suggestion. Haruhime hung her head, but Mikoto already seemed to accept that they would be going on an expedition.

“The lowest floor we’ve cleared is the twentieth...That means we’d need to aim for the twenty-first, right?” she said.

“Well, it’s not completely absurd to think we can do it. I mean, now that Mr. Bell is Level Four, he might even be able to manage quite easily...” Lilly said.

The suggested standard for those aiming to reach the twenty-fourth floor—the lowest floor of the middle levels—was Level 2 with ability levels that were anywhere from C to S. Considering that Bell was currently Level 4, he conveniently met these requirements.

“Of course, you have to be vigilant anytime you go to a floor for the first time,” Lilly added.

“This is a basic question, but how do we prove our expedition was a success? Guild staff don’t tag along or anything, do they?” Hestia had posed the question to Lilly, but Haruhime answered instead.

“As I recall...Aisha used to bring back drop items from specific monsters or chunks of ore. She used to say it was annoying because she had to return with at least ten things according to the rules...”

Although Haruhime was the weakest member of *Hestia Familia*, her input was priceless, since she was the only one among them to have gone on an expedition during her time spent with the large *Ishtar Familia*. There was a lot she didn’t know, because she had been a noncombatant, but she still had much to share.

“Also...I don’t really understand what they mean by your own familia has to do the expedition. What does it matter if I go along with someone else’s party or if I organize people from other parties myself? What’s the condition for meeting the requirement?” Welf asked.

Hestia examined the letter from the Guild.

“Um, well...it seems that members of our own familia have to make up more than half the party,” Hestia answered, reading through the mission order.

“Since the parties going on expeditions have been recognized as rank D or higher, they probably have to produce results in line with

their ranking,” Mikoto added.

To give an extreme example, if the Sword Princess were to join in a *Hestia Familia* expedition, it would be easy for them to achieve results. But the Guild expected members of the familia to act as a group when earning excelia on their target floor to make sure they grew stronger. The ultimate goal was to improve the efficiency of Dungeon exploration.

On the other hand, only the kindest people would be likely to dispatch one of their best adventurers on another familia’s expedition. That was all the truer if the expedition was headed for a destination where party members might be in danger.

Lilly, the brains of the faction, outlined their best plan going forward.

“To sum things up, if we care about our future, we can’t shirk this mission. And if we’re embarking on this expedition...then our safest plan is to gather a party including Mr. Bell, Mr. Welf, Miss Mikoto, Miss Haruhime as an emergency supporter, and some upper-class adventurers from other factions...”

She had to hold back her emotions during the latter half of this speech. Excluding herself from the party wasn’t a sign of masochism. It was a subjective, coolly made decision based on the fact that she was a Level-1 full-time supporter.

In essence, Bell’s level-up had brought on this expedition mission. The Guild was saying that Bell the adventurer had gained both a qualification and a responsibility. Now he had to choose companions suited to the task and devote himself to the next level of adventuring.

A momentary silence fell over the living room. No one could come to a decision easily in the face of such a huge event for the familia. Hestia, the group’s patron deity, closed her eyes briefly, then looked at Bell. As if following her lead, Welf and the others also turned their gaze on their captain.

“Bell. You’ve held your tongue until now. What do you want to do?” Hestia asked.

“I...”

Bell had been quietly listening to Lilly and the others talk, and now he finally opened his mouth to speak.

“I...Well, it’s partly for Wiene and the other Xenos and partly for myself...I want to become stronger than I am now.”

He added a “but,” then looked around at each familia member’s face.

“If possible...I want to become stronger with all of you.”

Lilly widened her eyes. So did Mikoto and Haruhime. Only Welf, the single other male familia member, let a smile break out.

“I want to move forward as a familia.”

His rubellite eyes, like his crystal-clear words, were full of determination. Not a single speck of indecision marred his message. But in the next moment, his usual apologetic expression returned.

“Uh...Sorry to be so pushy.”

“Come on, man, I told you not to apologize! We were happy about what you said...Right, everyone?”

“...Yes, very happy!”

“Yes, yes, definitely.”

“Absolutely. If we don’t experience joys and sorrows together, why even call ourselves a familia?”

Lilly smiled broadly, while Haruhime nodded repeatedly and Mikoto pressed her hands to her chest as if she was deeply moved. Even Hestia grinned, nodding firmly as she stood up.

“Let’s work together with Miach’s and Také’s familias! We’ll form a faction alliance for the expedition!” she shouted.

The next moment, Mikoto, Welf, Lilly, and Haruhime joined in the commotion.

“Yeah, we’ll do it with Master Ouka and Lady Chigusa!”

“Forget about petty stuff like the twenty-first floor; I’m aiming for the lower levels!”

“Don’t get carried away, Mr. Welf! That’s reckless!”

“I don’t know if I’ll be much help...B-but I’ll try!” Haruhime added.

Bell laughed wryly at the sudden lively atmosphere in the living room. Everyone had their eyes on the same target. Because a new goal had materialized, the entire familia was enjoying a refreshing level of enthusiasm.

Hestia Familia had decided to go on an expedition.



The very next day, they began their preparations.

Of course, that included gathering all the necessary items and supplies, as well as sharing information with *Miach* and *Takemikazuchi Familias* and asking for cooperation from friendly factions. Nahza, Ouka, their fellow familia members, and their patron deities all consented willingly. Only *Hephaistos Familia* decided to stay on the sidelines in order to preserve their position as a metalsmith familia.

A three-faction alliance was formed among *Hestia*, *Miach*, and *Takemikazuchi Familias*. They would set out on the expedition in ten days. In the meantime, each adventurer began working on the necessary preparations.

“So from *Miach Familia*, we’ll be joined by...”

“Myself and Cassandra. Our captain, Nahza, asks your pardon, but she seems to have been traumatized by monsters.”

“W-we are very grateful...!”

Lilly was meeting with *Miach Familia* members Daphne Laulos and Cassandra Illion to confirm their participation. They were seated in the reception room of Hearthstone Manor, which at first glance resembled a war room. Dozens of parchments were spread out on pushed-together tables, each covered in updated information about the Dungeon, such as whether floor bosses were present in certain places and where Irregulars had appeared. Maps of each floor, purchased from the Guild, were marked up in red pen with their planned routes and rest points. Lilly, their chief strategist, was using the room to meet with other faction members and consolidate pertinent information about the upcoming expedition.

“What positions will you two take, Miss Daphne?” she asked.

“Recently we’ve been going in as a pair, but before, my spot used to be in the middle and Cassandra was in the rear. I did whatever needed doing, but she was a healer, so I think she’ll really be an asset.”

“D-Daphne, stop complimenting me...!”

“Why are you getting shy now?”

Ignoring the pair’s comedy routine, Lilly licked her lips and made some notes with her feather pen on a parchment. She was adding information about the new all-rounder and healer to her notes about the party’s formation.

“So how big do you think the party will be? It seems pretty big already,” Daphne asked casually as she located Ouka’s and Welf’s names in the vanguard.

“Everyone in *Hestia Familia* will take part, plus Mr. Ouka and Miss Chigusa from *Takemikazuchi Familia*, and then the two of you...and Miss Aisha.”

“Aisha...You mean Aisha Belka, the Berbera?”

“A-Antianeira...!”

Cassandra shivered as she uttered the former *Ishtar Familia* Amazon’s alias.

“Wow...” Daphne gasped, eyes round.

“Yes...I don’t know who she heard about it from, but she suddenly showed up at our doorstep...”

Lilly scrunched her eyebrows in an inscrutable wiggle as she thought back on recent events. Barely any time had passed after the alliance was officially formed when Aisha appeared, saying she’d heard they were going on an expedition and wanted to know if they would bring her along. Like Haruhime, Antianeira had been on

numerous expeditions before, and her addition to the party would greatly increase the power at their disposal. Bell and the others had accepted her offer gratefully.

"But now, since the party is so strong, we've ended up aiming for the lower levels...Lilly can't help but feel anxious about that. Although it's true that an expedition made up of these members probably should already be thinking about heading for those floors of the Dungeon..."

Lilly let out a long sigh as she thought about how the hot-blooded Level-4 Amazon had tried to persuade her, boasting that they'd conquer the middle levels before the monsters even knew what was happening.

Daphne drew her eyebrows together.

"Huh. So it'll be a combined expedition...Is that really a good idea? Will everyone be able to cooperate properly?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Lilly said.

"Well, when I was in Apollo's familia, we went on some of those, but nothing much ever came of expeditions with other familias. The various members only did what they wanted."

Like *Hestia Familia*, *Apollo Familia* had organized a combined expedition when it rose to rank D.

"Usually, all you have to do is look at the patron deity to get an idea what their familia members are gonna be like. In most cases they're pretty similar. Like father, like son, as they say. Our experience was incredibly awful..." Daphne continued.

In other words, the familia of a deity who was always standing around smirking wouldn't amount to much. Lilly tilted her head quizzically at Daphne, although she was starting to understand her point.

"On this expedition, everyone knows one another, so I doubt there will be any major issues among friends. But all the same, cooperation is critical. Especially when you're heading to a floor appropriate for your level or even deeper."

"I"

"Let's combine our strength and do this together. Cooperation is everything," Daphne said.

Her words made Lilly realize that she had forgotten something in her planning: the need to collaborate with other familias. Regardless of the powerful individuals she had lined up, she had failed to fully investigate whether her hastily drawn-up formations would really hold in the Dungeon.

"And what about you?" Daphne continued. "You're just a supporter, right? And Level One at that. Are you gonna get yourself killed and drag us all down?"

“...”

“D-Daphne...”

It was a merciless pronouncement. But despite Cassandra’s gentle remonstration, Daphne hadn’t said anything that wasn’t true.

Daphne, noticing that Lilly’s hands were squeezed tightly into fists, changed her tone.

“But if you still want to come along...well, then maybe you should really put your foot down.”

“Huh?”

“Insist you won’t do anything yourself. Instead, make the rest of us do stuff.”

Lilly’s chestnut-brown eyes were fixed on Daphne.

“You’ll be the commander, right? I, for one, did a lot of things just because I was forced to and had no other choice.”

Daphne drew a dagger that resembled a conductor’s baton from the sword belt at her waist. With a *swoosh*, the human girl swung it lightly through the air and shrugged.

“Having someone keep an eye on things from the tail end is important, too, you know.”

“...!”

“This won’t be like the wars from back in the day, but good leadership can still really save a party. They say adventurers live or die depending on who’s in the rear guard. That’s how Finn Deimne pushed his way to the top, I hear.”

Lilly felt like she was seeing something inside herself for the first time. An image of Braver commanding the very best adventurers down in the Dungeon, and, layered on top of that, an image of herself doing the same.

She felt like she had finally grasped the vision she needed to aim for.

“That prum’s bravery is foolish, of course,” Daphne said.

“...”

“So, what are you going to do? Want me to show you how to take command?”

Cassandra, who had been left completely out of this conversation, was looking back and forth between Lilly and Daphne.

Lilly realized that Daphne was peering down at her.

“Yes please!” she said.

“Yaaa!!”

An earsplitting shout echoed across the blue sky.

The god of combat used his hand to easily deflect the sharp kick that the girl had sent flying toward his face.

“You’re still weak.”

“Oof?!”

“M-Mikoto!”

Mikoto and Chigusa, who had both been thrown to the ground, huddled together. After parrying the Level-2, third-tier adventurer’s high kick, Takemikazuchi looked down on the two girls as he wiped sweat from his brow.

“Mikoto, Chigusa. The two of you are thinking too much about your status. Never rely on your weapons to settle things. Control the situation with your spirit.”

“Yes, sir, Master Takemikazuchi!”

Mikoto grabbed Chigusa’s hand and pulled herself to her knees. Still kneeling, she looked up at the deity. Beneath a clear blue sky, the lush verdant growth of the lawn glinted in the sunlight. The three were in the courtyard of Hearthstone Manor, which they had borrowed for training. The girls were honing their skills in preparation for the upcoming expedition.

“Lots of adventurers get too caught up in their Status...That’s what the first-tier adventurers say, and I agree. When I use my skills fully, I can match or even beat you.”

While Takemikazuchi was dripping with sweat, Mikoto and Chigusa showed only a light sheen on their skin. Yet they were covered in grass stains from being thrown repeatedly onto the ground. The stark contrast made their relative positions obvious. The girls possessed the physical ability to fight monsters, while Takemikazuchi would have been as helpless as any ordinary person in such a situation. But despite their power, the god of combat was able to parry their blows and even use their momentum against them to send them flying.

The outcome rested entirely on skill and tactics.

Using his defensive skills, superhuman martial arts, eerily perceptive decision-making ability, and observational skills, Takemikazuchi led his opponents in the direction he desired. Alone, his combat skills exceeded those of a first-tier adventurer. His abilities were nothing short of godly, much like the supreme metalsmithing skills of Hephaistos, which no mortal smith could approach.

Certainly, if Mikoto and Chigusa kept up their attacks on Takemikazuchi, there was little doubt that they would eventually defeat him. But they weren’t after a quick victory.

“Status can’t be improved overnight. But—”

“Skill and tactics are a different matter.”

Takemikazuchi nodded as Mikoto finished his sentence.

“Of course, skills are not easy to acquire, either. But if you put in enough effort and you have a strong desire to succeed...then it’s possible.”

Mikoto squeezed her hands into tight fists as Takemikazuchi spoke, the looped buns of hair on either side of his face shaking. Just as he said, what she wanted was the strength to take on a powerful opponent. She wanted the skills that would let her save her companions and successfully navigate an adventure in the enormous underground labyrinth.

“It’s like I taught you in the Far East. Skills are the weapons you use when confronting an opponent who is stronger than you. In terms of their physical build, most monsters are overwhelmingly powerful... but if you use your skills at the right time with the right breathing, you can defeat even the largest enemy, crack even the hardest shell.”

Takemikazuchi wiped the sweat from his naked upper body and drew a dagger from the sheath tied around his waist. It was Tenka, the male half of a paired set of daggers where the female half belonged to Mikoto.

Takemikazuchi raised Tenka in one hand and took up a combat stance facing Mikoto and Chigusa.

“You’ve come a long way since your time in the Far East. Now it’s time for me to teach you the martial arts you didn’t learn back then, as you wish. Come and get me!”

“Yes, sir!”

The two girls ran toward him. Simply and earnestly, they gave themselves over to the tough training he offered.

“What’s up, Big Guy?”

A high metallic clanging rang out.

Thanks to the fire blazing in the furnace, the workshop was hot enough to kill. Welf stood in front of the flames using his red hammer to shape the ingot on the anvil into a weapon.

Ouka, of *Takemikazuchi Familia*, watched his motions from behind as if entranced.

“I want to get as much done as I can before we head out on this expedition,” Welf said.

His workshop was situated in the backyard of *Hestia Familia*’s home. With the red flames casting a crimson glow, the room’s dim interior looked like a magical world. The hulking young man who had come to visit sat in the chair Welf had lent him, arms crossed as the smith responded.

“Even if you and I were to train together, it wouldn’t make much difference.”

“I know.”

“And there’s no way skills and magic are going to appear at the very moment we need them.”

“I know that, too.”

Sweat rained down from Welf's chin, and Ouka's skin was damp, too, just from watching. Each young man appeared to be trying to outdo the other's ability to tolerate the blazing heat. It was like a scene in some fable where the hero tries to persuade the stubborn craftsman.

"I'm a metalsmith. What I'm trying to do is...make the strongest gear I can, so I can help Bell and the rest of the party in my own way."

Pieces of Bell's dir-adamantite armor leaned against the wall next to Welf, already fully repaired. In addition to the armor, there were dozens of new items that Welf had prepared for Bell, Mikoto, and other party members, including broadswords, katanas, spears, arrowheads, throwing weapons, shields, and magic swords.

Still immersed in his work, Welf's gaze was sharp and impassioned.

He raised the hammer and brought it down. Each time he repeated the motion, the heat in the room seemed to pulse stronger.

"In combat, I may drag the others down, but this is my true role. I'm going to do everything I can."

"..."

"I don't have time to hang out with you."

Like the sound of the hammer hitting the metal, Welf's voice rang out decisively.

"Try the others," he said, his back to Ouka.

"Make me a weapon."

Welf's shoulder twitched in surprise at Ouka's words.

"..."

"Not some half-assed thing. Something that will let me protect Chigusa and Haruhime and everyone else. That's what I want...Will you do it?"

Ouka's voice was just as strong and stubborn as Welf's.

Welf gave the metal one last, particularly intense blow, then turned toward Ouka.

"A custom-made weapon from me will cost you," he said with a grin.

Ouka's eyebrows furrowed in consternation.

"...Give me a deal."

"I'll give you a kick in the ass!"

"Haruhime, come over here with me."

With that, the Amazon Aisha pulled the renart girl into the study of Hearthstone Manor. The books that had been on the shelves when they took over the building from *Apollo Familia* were still there, giving the room the atmosphere of a small library.

Aisha led Haruhime to the large table and sat her down. With the

curtains shut tight, the spacious room seemed quite dim.

“Um, Lady Aisha...What do you plan to do in here?” Haruhime asked, peering around the room that she usually cleaned as a maid. Aisha sat on the table directly in front of her and set down her bundle.

“Special training for you, of course,” she said casually, her long black hair swaying as she adjusted her ill-mannered perch on the table.

“S-special training?” Haruhime parroted idiotically.

The sexy, shrewish Amazon, whose outfit resembled that of a dancing girl, swatted the fox girl’s ears.

“You’re the weakling. You know that, right?”

“Uh...”

“If you don’t learn some tricks before the expedition, you’re really gonna be in the way.”

Aisha was right. Haruhime was part supporter, part sorcerer. Despite her illegal ability to grant level boosts, her basic combat ability was even lower than Lilly’s.

“But I can’t move around like Mikoto and the others...”

Haruhime had learned some defensive moves from Mikoto, but she lacked the makings of a warrior and did not pick things up quickly. Even if she learned how to defeat a low-level monster in the Dungeon, it would be a mere drop in the bucket.

“Idiot,” Aisha said to the glum Haruhime. “You’re a sorcerer. You must have at least enough magic to merit the name. I expect more from you than clumsy bungling.”

“Uh...So you mean we’re going to practice to improve my magical powers?”

“Nope. You’re going to learn *new* magic.”

Aisha smiled at the flabbergasted Haruhime.

“Skills and magic don’t appear whenever people want them to, so we’ll just have to draw them out by force.”

With a *thud*, Aisha set down the bundle she’d brought with her in front of Haruhime, and then untied the cloth. Inside was a thick book, the cover of which was decorated with an intricate pattern.

“This is a...!”

“A grimoire. I don’t know what magic will come from it, but I doubt that it’ll be worthless, whatever it is.”

The text would *force* magic to come forth. Even the unworldly Haruhime knew the value of the tome that lay before her. The miraculous items were never found in ordinary markets. They were so rare that it wouldn’t be strange to call them phantom books.

“Ishtar would’ve never let you read a grimoire, but that was because she was so fixated on how potent the level boost was. If her sealed renart learned more than one kind of magic, it would be a

waste, since the smashed killing stone would only allow a single power to be used.”

Aisha was explaining Ishtar’s rationale, but the information went in one fox ear and out the other. Gulping at the grimoire, Haruhime timidly raised her face.

“By the way, where did you get this...?”

“I waited till my patron deity and the rest of the familia weren’t looking, and then I filched it from our storeroom.”

After a momentary silence, Haruhime coughed uncomfortably. Aisha waved her hand carelessly, as if to say it was no big deal.

“It’s fine. They take advantage of me and treat me like a convenient pawn, so this is the least I could do to balance things out.”

The Amazon, who had converted to *Hermes Familia*, looked proud of herself. By now, the familia would have noticed the precious volume was missing and was probably going crazy over it. Haruhime had known the senior prostitute was daring since their time together in *Ishtar Familia*, but all she could do at this renewed reminder of Aisha’s character was sputter in panic.

“You want to help the boys, don’t you?”

“!”

“Then you don’t have much choice. You’re the weakling, and what you need now is unvarnished greed for improvement.”

Aisha brought her face right up to Haruhime’s, who stared back at her in shock. Still sitting on the table, Aisha suddenly curled her lips.

“Read it fast and start practicing. Ten days should be enough to master a new kind of magic.”

Aisha got down from the table and stepped away from Haruhime to make sure she didn’t accidentally steal the effects of the grimoire.

Haruhime had been following the movements of the smiling Amazon with her eyes, and then, as she thought back to the conversation with Bell and the others in the living room the other night, she pressed her lips together.

I’m...I’m part of the familia!

Her hand clasped the cover of the grimoire and energetically flipped it open.

“Miss Eina, will you tell me about the Great Falls again?”

“Uh, um, yeah,” she answered in a shrill voice.

Bell opened an illustrated book and showed it to Eina, who was sitting across from him. She traced the words on the page with her slender finger.

It was night, and they were in the reference room of Guild Headquarters. Bell was getting a private seminar from Eina. Drawing on her knowledge, he was hoping to drill into his head as much

information as possible about the floors they planned to traverse and the monsters they might meet during the expedition. Since they were heading into new territory, he had decided to spend the entire ten-day preparation period studying.

When he came across something he didn't understand, he asked Eina, and when he felt unsure of something, he pursued an answer until he was completely satisfied.

Even though there was usually a gap between the information in books and the reality in the Dungeon, Bell already knew after five short months as an adventurer that information he gathered ahead of time could save his life, as well as possibly serve as a potent weapon to protect his party.

He was determined to do everything he could right now. Thinking about what would be needed, Bell looked to both the past and future for hints. He had risked his life in the middle levels, and now he was reaching toward the deeper floors where Irregulars were commonplace. As he examined the material with his far-from-efficient mind, he became greedy for more knowledge.

He's changed...

Eina watched him pore over the information. Her cheeks resting on her hands, she felt her gaze drawn again and again to his rubellite eyes.

"Miss Eina?"

He had sensed her eyes on him and looked up.

"Huh?...Uh, nothing, sorry!" she said in a flustered voice, waving her hands at him.

He gave her a funny look. She waited until he returned his gaze to the book, then sighed. Her face felt hot.

I've changed, too...

Eina had been suffering ever since the day the black minotaur defeated Bell. She wasn't in pain—in fact, it could even be called a pleasant feeling—but she didn't know how to deal with it, and it made her a little embarrassed. She was astonished by how her heart had soared when Bell asked her to help him study.

The space between them as they sat on opposite sides of the desk was irritating her. Being so close and yet so far was driving her crazy. Fidgeting at the fact that no one besides the two of them was in the room, she stole another glance at Bell's face.

I didn't realize boys could grow up so much...

Bell was still absorbed in reading the heavy volume. In the past, he'd been a poor student, but now he was taking the lead in asking for lessons. When she'd given him a pop quiz earlier in the night, he made some mistakes but far fewer than in the past.

Ever since that day, he'd been trying to shed his old skin. No—

perhaps he already had.

What in the world happened that day? I wish I could ask him...

Eina didn't know anything about the incident with the Xenos. She'd wanted to ask him about it but ultimately had found herself unable to form the words.

In the past, she wouldn't have had any trouble asking him, much like a concerned sister questioning her little brother.

But now, Eina didn't want to bother him. It was as though she was a woman silently protecting her man.

...This is not good...I'm in trouble.

Eina surrendered herself to the situation, acknowledging once again the bind she was in.

She'd never fallen in love before, not as a child and not as a student. Now all she could do was remain aware of her emotions.

That was the first time I saw a boy, a man, cry out loud.

Her heart fluttered sweetly as the memory of the events of that night came flooding vividly back to her. Suddenly, her face felt hot again.

I have to stop this!

She laid her head on the table and wrapped her arms around her face.

Bell looked at her in surprise.

"Uh, um...Miss Eina, are you all right...?"

"Even though I know you idolize Miss Wallenstein..."

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

She pressed her burning cheek against the cool desk and sniffled.

*And he's so much younger than me...I can't even look straight at him.
I'm such a child, even at this age!*

Eina felt embarrassed by her own feelings.

"Eh?!"

"What's wrong, Hestia?" Miach asked as the goddess jerked in surprise, her black pigtails twitching.

"I sense a sweet-and-sour aura bearing down on Bell!"

"What are you talking about...?" Takemikazuchi said. He looked surprised. Following her deity's instinct, the young goddess had turned around to scan her surroundings.

As the stars twinkled in the night sky outside, she and the two gods crowded around a table in a bar on a quiet side street. They'd decided to have a casual meeting over drinks, since their families were about to embark on a joint expedition.

"I'm worried about Bell...But thank you again, Miach and Také, for lending us your support."

“No need to thank me, Hestia. Just doing what good neighbors do,” Miach said.

“He’s right. Anyway, when it comes to expeditions, we’re not strangers,” Takemikazuchi added.

Hestia bowed her head in appreciation. The two gods laughed. They’d become friends because all three were at the bottom of the familia hierarchy, and they’d get together to poke fun at themselves. Hestia was grateful to call such upstanding gods and their familias her friends. She smiled. Without them, neither she nor Bell would have been able to make it in Orario.

“Still...I do feel a little guilty about leaving all the work to the kids while we go out for a drink,” Takemikazuchi said, reaching for a snack.

“What else can we do? Bell and the others have everything taken care of. When I tried to help, my supporter said, ‘I don’t want you messing up all my preparations, so why don’t you go to your job or something!’ I was kicked out of the house!” Hestia replied with a pout, imitating Lilly’s voice. The two gods laughed wryly.

“Mikoto has really been working hard, coming to me every day to ask for training,” Takemikazuchi added.

“Same with Nahza. She’s trying to develop some new medicines for Bell and the others...Everyone is working toward the same goal. Things are going well, I think,” Miach said.

Lessons, training, magic, studying...Everyone was preparing for the expedition in their own way. Although Miach’s voice was tinged with envy toward the humans who, unlike the deusdea, were able to improve themselves, he smiled brightly.

“It’s not just Bell...Everyone is growing up. They hardly need my help anymore!”

“What’s this, Hestia, do I detect a little loneliness?”

“Of course I’m lonely! I can’t follow them into the Dungeon, can I?”

Hestia drained her cup and lurched forward.

“Drunk already?” Takemikazuchi teased, leaning away from her.

Hestia blushed, then switched moods and smiled.

“But I’m equally happy! No, *proud* is a better word for it!”

“Hestia...”

“When everyone talks about how much Bell has grown...I get this feeling deep in my chest.”

She would never reveal such motherly pride to the children, of course. But they’d been through a lot together, she and Bell. He had survived many adventures, tasted frustration, and learned to keep running forward even when he was covered head to toe in mud.

The familia story she had traced onto his back was a precious

treasure.

Hestia grinned like the young goddess she was, and the two male gods narrowed their eyes as if they understood how she felt.

“He used to be such a crybaby, but now he’s able to speak his mind clearly in front of everyone. He’s grown up beautifully...I’ve fallen for him all over again! I had butterflies in my stomach just watching him! Damn it, I’ll never hand him over to another soul!”

“That was real beautiful, except the last bit.”

“Yeah!”

The gods sipped their drinks as Hestia threw both hands in the air and crowded.

“To tell you the truth, I’m a little worried about this expedition... but I have faith that Bell and the others will get through it,” she said.

“If anyone can do it, that group can.”

“Yeah, just like Hestia said.”

The three deities raised their glasses.

“Let’s drink to Bell and the rest.”

“Shouldn’t we give them a toast?”

“Let’s save that for when they get back.”

The warm light of the magic-stone lamps illuminated the dusky blue atmosphere of the lively bar. A bard struck up a tune for the drunken patrons, the pleasant melody evoking the prelude to an adventure tale.

“Here’s to a successful adventure for the children—”

The three deities gathered at the round table smiled at one another and clinked their glasses together.

““Cheers!””



The sky that day was nearly cloudless.

As the sun peeked its face over the massive eastern wall of the city, Orario opened its eyes and leaped into action. Sunbeams poured down from the blue sky where a few white clouds floated. In front of Hearthstone Manor, in the city’s sixth ward, a crowd of humans and demi-humans gathered. They were adventurers from various factions, about to set out on an expedition.

“Are you all ready?”

“Yes! I’ve packed as many items, extra weapons, and provisions as I could fit.”

Lilly adjusted her backpack, which was stuffed even fuller than usual. Aisha smiled at her, resting her huge sword called a *podao* on her shoulder.

Nearby, Mikoto and Chigusa ogled Ouka's sparkling silver weapon.

"Sir Ouka, has Sir Welf made a new weapon for you as well? Oh my, that looks like a fine blade," Mikoto gushed.

"What an ax!...But Ouka, the money...?" Chigusa said.

"...I'll make the cost back on this expedition," Ouka responded solemnly. Welf, who was standing just behind him holding his greatsword, grinned.

Meanwhile, Nahza was handing Haruhime a sack bursting at its seams.

"Haruhime, I've just finished making these new potions today... Please take them. Fight hard, sister..."

"Th-thank you, Lady Nahza!" Haruhime said as she accepted the bag from the chienthrope, who had dark circles under her eyes. Touched by the words of encouragement from this member of her race, Haruhime bowed in her hooded black cloak, the Goliath Robe.

Takemikazuchi, Miach, Hephaistos, and the familia members who would stay home stood at a slight distance from the adventurers headed for the Dungeon, wishing them well on the expedition.

"Leave it to me to guard our home. Go raise hell!"

"Don't do anything too crazy."

"Take care of yourself!"

Nahza and several members of *Takemikazuchi Familia* were in charge of watching their homes while everyone else was gone. As for *Hestia Familia*, whose members were all participating in the expedition, Hephaistos planned to assign one of her High Smiths to guard their home. Once word got out that such a fiercely powerful smith was there, not even the dumbest thief would dare approach. The adventurers were able to take part in the expedition only because of this assistance on the home front.

Bell looked at the two groups—those departing and those staying home—and then glanced up at the sky. The weather was good, and so were the expressions on the faces of his companions. Morale was high.

Of course, there were exceptions.

"Daphne...Can't you stop this expedition?"

"Huh? Isn't it a bit late for that?"

"I had a premonition last night...I have a feeling that something horrible is going to happen..."

"That again? You know we can't stop it now!"

Cassandra was on the verge of tears, having been rebuffed by her partner. She turned to Bell, who was on her other side, as if to cling to him.

"Um...I'm sorry..." Bell said, scratching his head.

Gently turned away by him as well, Cassandra hung her head. Bell

directed a strained smile at the girl, who had been pulled back by Daphne, and turned his eyes to his patron deity.

“Well, Goddess.”

“Bell, whatever you do, don’t let down your guard!”

“I understand.”

“...Fight hard!”

“...I will!”

As the sunlight poured down on them, Hestia and Bell exchanged smiles. Bell engraved the image of her smile and the sunny sky into his memory. He would not see either for quite some time.

When he turned back around, he saw that Welf and the others were waiting eagerly for his signal to embark on their journey. Bell nodded and turned again toward Hestia and the other deities.

“We’re off!”

Exactly five months had passed since the boy arrived in Orario. Now, he was departing on *Hestia Familia*’s first expedition.



The faction alliance expected the expedition to last one week.

Aisha assured them that a party like this could easily make it to their destination and back in five days, so they had planned their trip accordingly, including where they would set up camp beyond the safety points.

Welf, Ouka, and Bell made up the vanguard of the formation heading into the Dungeon. The center was split into two groups: Mikoto, Chigusa, and Daphne would act as floaters to protect the combatants and supporters, while Lilly, Haruhime, and Cassandra served as supporters. In reality, the function of the latter three was more like a rear guard. Aisha, a powerful Level-4 fighter, was stationed at the very end to dispel any attacks from behind.

Of course, this was the first time *Hestia Familia* was acting as part of such a large group, so they expected to carefully observe how the coalition worked and make temporary changes in positions as needed.

Ultimately, they were headed for the lower levels.

“—Aah!!”

A screech split the air.

Bell’s Hestia Knife flashed in a violet arc as it cleaved a monster in half.

“OUUUUUUU!!”

Belatedly, the mad beetle’s death cry thundered through the passageway.

“Little Rookie! No, I mean Rabbit Foot, right? Keep it up! Kill them all!” Daphne cried as the two halves of the enormous beetle rolled over the bark-covered floor, pressing her against the wall. Bell narrowed his eyes sharply and nodded as he raised his new knife in his left hand and kicked off the ground.

They were in the Colossal Tree Labyrinth on the twenty-fourth floor.

The party had rapidly broken *Hestia Familia*’s previous record for Dungeon floors cleared and was now in the lowest section of the middle levels. One reason for their speed was Bell.

“UOO?!”

In place of the purple arc, a heroic white flash emanated from his left hand.

The beautiful, glittering white knife reduced the monster to a cloud of ash with a single blow.

Like the Hestia Knife in his right hand, Hakugen—the new weapon in his left—was quickly racking up an impressive bodycount. Measuring thirty-five celch from tip to base, the long knife fell just between the Hestia Knife and a baselard in size. Incredibly, it was made from unicorn horn, a rare drop item. Welf had crafted it for Bell with great care, and its blade was even sharper than the lost Ushiwakamaru. Every time Bell moved his arm even slightly, a flash of light instantaneously shot forth, proclaiming death to herds of swordstag monsters.

As usual, Bell wore his dir-adamantite armor, currently on its fifth reincarnation. The durable, lightweight set shined like new thanks to Welf’s repairs. For the moment, it was still scratch free. His left leg was wrapped in a new holster made of old bison leather, far stronger than his previous one.

Fitted out in new gear from Welf, Bell got to work driving off the monsters circling the party, just as Daphne had requested.

“Hornet at two o’clock!”

Lilly was shouting out a constant stream of information to Bell, who had moved away from the main formation. Jet-black deadly hornets were zooming in for an attack, wings buzzing.

“Smith, get down! Your shield isn’t in position!” Ouka warned from his spot in the vanguard.

“Unfortunately, I’m bad with shields!” Welf shouted back, holding his massive shield with both hands. As the deadly hornets bore down on them at an angle, their defensive positions wavered. Multiple giant insects attacked with claws, poison stingers, and body blows. The two young men up front took the brunt of the attack but managed to hold strong.

Protected by Welf and Ouka, Mikoto and Chigusa shot arrows at

the hornets from their position in the center, but—

“They’re fast...!”

“Damn...!”

The deadly hornets flew nimbly through the air, easily evading the arrows. Even when one hit its mark, it bounced right back off again; the hornets had exoskeletons even harder than those of killer ants. As they harassed the Level-2 adventurers, it was obvious why they were also known as “high killer bees.”

“...!”

At that very moment, Bell intervened with lightning speed.

He had just finished off some monsters away from the rest of the party when he immediately raced straight toward the Dungeon wall. Living up to his new nickname, he launched himself from the wall and leaped into the swarm of hornets.

“—”

Taken off guard from behind, they froze. Bell’s rubellite eyes glinted as he swung the Hestia Knife.

“—GAAA?!”

The white blade sliced through their rock-hard exoskeletons and sets of double wings like butter.

Bell kept flying forward from the extreme force of his leap. Still in midair, he stuffed the Hestia Knife back into its sheath and used the momentum from his blow to spin halfway around, thrusting out his now-free right hand and shouting.

“Firebolt!”

Two deadly hornets burst into fragments as two shots of electrified flames drilled into them.

Thanks to Bell’s recent level-up, the firepower and speed of his Swift-Strike Magic attack had been boosted. The monsters had no time to dodge. As gravity pulled Bell back to the ground, motes of fire fell around him.

“W-wow...”

“There was a time when you would have been running for your life from those guys, but now...”

Cassandra and the others in the formation’s center were dumbfounded. Welf sighed in amazement and grinned as if he thought they were invincible.

“Uaaaaa!”

A second later, he and Ouka thrust out their shields and knocked down several more hornets zooming in for an attack run. Instantly, Mikoto and Chigusa jumped out from between the two young men and thrust their daggers into gaps in the exoskeletons.

“But this is pointless...As long as we don’t get rid of *that*, these hornets will keep attacking us. Even if we run from the bees, we won’t

get far,” Aisha muttered. As the front and middle ranks worked together to reduce monsters to ash, she was left alone at the rear to fend off swarms closing in on them from behind.

She glanced back at the Dungeon wall, where a massive hornet’s nest was buried in sap. The colony was covered in countless deadly hornets, but it was also a monster itself—a rare one that existed co-dependently with the hornets. It was a bloody hive.

The seven-meter-long, pinecone-shaped black mass looked like some hideous fruit. An immobile trap-type monster, it normally buried itself inside a hollow big enough to allow deadly hornets to fly in and out. But the instant prey approached, it burst through the Dungeon wall to reveal its full form.

When one of these monsters appeared on the main route, things got extremely nasty. Bell and the others were experiencing that misery at this very moment.

“There’s no end to it! Cassandra, can’t you get this mucus off yet?!”

“Sorry, Daphne, I still need more time!”

“Everyone, I’m sorry I can’t help!”

The nest’s means of attack was a liquid it shot out that didn’t kill or wound but was so adhesive that it completely immobilized anyone who was hit. Deadly hornets would then fly out and impale the trapped victim. Haruhime had been caught unawares by the emerging colony and lay helpless on the floor, covered in orange goop. Welf and Ouka were trying to guard the supporters, but their shields were also smeared with the sticky material.

The worst part of it all was the ludicrous number of deadly hornets that were spawning. Since the bloody hive was directly connected to the Dungeon, hornets were appearing at a much greater rate than usual. As the adventurers focused their energy on fighting off the insects, other monsters approached from side paths. It was a vicious downward spiral.

“Don’t waver! We have to take it down!”

Occupying the main route and spitting out hornets one after the other, the colony was the key. Calling it a citadel for monsters would not be an overstatement.

The adventurers quickly set about taking the veritable fortress down, just as Aisha—who had wiped out all the monsters approaching from the rear—had instructed.

Ring, ring!

Light radiated from Bell’s right hand. As he continued intercepting deadly hornets, he initiated a Concurrent Charge.

In place of an activation chant, the sound of a bell rang out. Bell finished up his current attack and fell back from the vanguard to

Lilly's position in order to stand at the ideal range.

"Center, step back! Form a circle around Mr. Bell!"

Lilly's order echoed out to each member of the party. Mikoto, Chigusa, and Daphne quickly took the shields handed to them to ward off the ferocious swarm of attacking and receding hornets. Aisha did the same with her weapon, the *podao*.

Ouka and Welf joined them in the battle line, beating back the violent attacks.

"—I'm gonna fire!"

It had taken only seconds for Bell to assume his position.

The adventurers split off to the left and right to open a direct path for Bell, who had transformed into a living gun ready to fire.

He had charged for twenty seconds.

Using his radiating right arm as a barrel, he let loose.

"Firebolt!"

A massive blast of electrical fire edged in white light shot forward. All the hornets in the line of fire were instantly incinerated. The hideous colony exploded with tremendous force.

"—AAH?!"

The monsters still inside the nest shrieked wretchedly, and an earsplitting roar followed.

The Dungeon wall burst into fragments along with the bloody hive, filling the passageway with masses of ash and smoke.

"Whew...I'm exhausted. It feels like I just finished fighting a floor boss!"

"Well, it's practically the same thing. That hornet's nest is the worst thing around here."

The conversation between Daphne and Aisha, who were sitting on Lilly's backpack in the middle of the passageway chugging down potions and water, echoed through the now-quiet space.

Bell and the others were taking care of the aftermath now that their biggest battle of the day was over. That meant collecting magic stones and drop items. Purple crystals far purer and larger than those found at higher levels were laying among pieces of the deadly hornets' tough exoskeletons and piles of ash. They set about gathering the loot and extracting magic stones from the remains of the monsters.

"I'm sorry, Master Bell...I slowed you all down."

"It's not your fault, Miss Haruhime. In fact, we should have been protecting *you*."

Haruhime had finally been freed from the viscous liquid and was helping with the cleanup. Since there had been so many monsters, everyone—not just supporters—had to join in.

"Mr. Bell...you're so amazing."

“Huh?”

Chigusa, who was working nearby with Ouka, had broken into Bell’s conversation.

“You’ve killed more monsters than anyone else so far...I thought you were incredible before, but...you’re just, I mean, you’re really incredible now!” she said, bubbling with excitement as she peered out from behind her bangs.

Ouka’s eyebrows scrunched at an odd angle as he listened. “It’s the same with Antianeira. Level Four is just a completely different world. Makes me feel like a worthless oaf...” His voice was tinged with frustration and competitiveness.

“I-I think so, too. The way he moves, compared to the War Game, it’s, how can I put it...?!” Cassandra said as she scoured the area for items.

“Sharper, is that what you mean, Lady Cassandra?” Mikoto said.

“Yes, exactly!”

Both seemed completely in awe of Bell’s combat prowess. As for the boy himself, he was more embarrassed than pleased by the praise. He didn’t know what to say in this kind of situation. The same had been true when he moved up to Level 2. He simply wasn’t good at accepting compliments. He rested his hand awkwardly on the back of his head.

As his mind rambled incoherently, he suddenly felt a pair of eyes on him and shifted his gaze.

Haruhime was standing right next to him, staring at his face.

“Miss Haruhime?”

“Uh...I-I’m sorry, I’m being impolite...”

“It’s not a problem...but is something the matter?”

She seemed to be wondering about something and wanting to say something. Bell urged her on with his eyes.

The renart shifted her gaze away, then timidly opened her mouth.

“When...um, before, when the thing happened with the Xenos, you were very troubled by it, so I was worried...about whether you’d really be able to fight monsters again.”

Bell widened his eyes slightly as he listened.

He had considered the exact same thought himself before. At one point, he’d been extremely concerned about whether he’d still be able to kill monsters—or even continue as an adventurer—after learning about the Xenos. He’d never been able to come up with a good answer.

Haruhime, aware of his state during that time, was confused by the present Bell, who took down monsters with such unfettered enthusiasm that he garnered praise from Ouka and the others.

Confronted by the concerned look in the girl’s green eyes, Bell was

momentarily wordless. As Mikoto and the others returned to work, Bell turned away from Haruhime and knelt by a pile of ash. He sifted through the gray dust that slipped through his fingers like sand and withdrew a beautiful purple crystal. Then he stood and, staring at the monster's magic stone in his hand, answered Haruhime.

"I decided to become a hypocrite."

Now it was Haruhime's turn to be surprised.

Hypocrite!

Bell recalled the violent hunter's insult, and then the words of the wise fool: *Those criticized for hypocrisy possess the necessary qualities to become a hero.*

Those words had remained in his ears and heart all along, and he had accepted them. After the black minotaur had defeated him, he had made up his mind.

To save Wiene and the other Xenos, he would kill their brethren.

He would do it even though he knew ordinary monsters could be reborn as Xenos.

To save those who were important to him, he would take countless lives.

They may have been monsters, but he would still be snuffing out their very existence.

No one had ordered him to do it. He had chosen this path for himself.

He had decided, and set his mind to it.

He would content himself with either being honored as a hero or disgraced as a villain, so long as it was a consequence of those actions.

Let me become a hypocrite, then, he thought to himself as his gaze bored into the glittering crystal.

"...!"

The renart girl gasped and shuddered at the sight of his resolute face. Her cheeks flushed red with admiration.

Totally oblivious, Bell squeezed the magic stone firmly in his palm.

"He was plenty strong before...but now, it's like I feel more secure," Welf said.

"Is that so...?" Lilly replied.

The two were watching Haruhime and Bell from a distance. In contrast to the smith, who seemed pleased, the prum girl looked troubled.

"What's the gloomy face for? It's not like he's dangerous now or anything."

"I know that..."

Just as Welf said, there wasn't so much as a hint of a threat on the

boy's face. He hadn't become rushed and reckless. His was the face of someone who had overcome indecision and arrived at a definite answer. His decisive gaze cut straight ahead into the distance. As his unchanging feelings grew stronger, so did he.

"Compared to before, he is much...much, *much* more dependable. But it's like he's grown distant in equal measure..."

That was Lilly's honest impression. Her voice was sad and dejected as she told Welf how Bell seemed to be racing further and further ahead of and away from them.

Welf stared down at the girl, whose head hung glumly, then laughed provocatively.

"Isn't it your job to back him up, Supporter?"

Lilly looked startled, then sullen.

"I'm going to be right up there with him. Actually, I'm going to be even stronger than him. So don't get left behind!" Welf said.

"O-obviously!! Lilly is Bell's supporter, his number one partner. She won't be beaten by Welf or anyone else!"

"Back to your old self, I see...Hey, stop hitting me! That hurts!"

Smack, smack!!

Lilly laid into Welf a couple of times, then slapped her own cheeks.

She had made up her mind once again to fortify herself. The sight of Bell fighting so hard had renewed her own enthusiasm.

"..."

Aisha gazed at the scene ahead of her and thought about their situation.

Their arrival on the twenty-fourth floor definitely hadn't been due to Bell's strength alone. As they moved from floor to floor, Mikoto, Ouka, and the others had cooperated seamlessly. They'd seen Bell's performance, and they'd tried to fight just as hard as him.

It was like Lilly and Welf were saying: An individual's actions could raise the morale of all his companions. A single person could inspire determination and strength in many others.

If that's the case, then it's exactly like...

He must be what the deities called...a "hero."

At the very least, he had the raw potential to become one.

No...he didn't have them; he grabbed ahold of them.

From the most ordinary of places.

He'd lamented his own weakness, then stared up at the peaks of strength. He was still running, reaching out for whatever handhold he could find. His progress was still surprising even for the deities.

Everything had begun in chance encounters.

And all these opportunities were what made the boy strong.

Even Aisha admired him.

...*He's almost ripe, I think*, she muttered, narrowing her eyes. Some distance from her, Bell shuddered imperceptibly.



As Lilly pops open her cracked watch with a *snap*, she announces that night has fallen up on the surface.

We're done exploring for today, so we decide to take an extended rest in the Dungeon. In other words, it's time to set up camp.

The spot we've chosen is a gaping tree hollow alongside a small path off the main route on the twenty-fourth floor. We decide to use the pocket of space a short way inside. The "room" was one of the candidates for a rest point that we identified beforehand on the map provided by the Guild.

The first thing we have to do before taking a major rest is wreck the environment of the Dungeon.

We attack the surrounding walls and floor of the labyrinth with our weapons. Doing that forces the Dungeon to prioritize repairing the area, meaning no monsters will spawn there for some time. The next thing to do is station a guard at the entrance to the room to ensure no monsters make it inside. Then we quickly wipe out any monsters already occupying the room and at the same time, go to work on the walls inside with our axes and hammers.

I guess the best way to describe the room is to say it's like a space underneath a tree. It's about the size of a small common room. The walls are covered in little white flowers and leaves, along with the occasional herb. When you look up at the ceiling about three meters above, a dome formed by tree roots is visible. Clumps of Lamp Moss on the surface of the dome emit a greenish light, which actually makes the room quite bright.

"I chose this spot randomly off the map, but it's pretty nice!" Lilly says. She's taken off her heavy backpack and is breathing in the deep-green air with relish.

On the way here, we took a break on the eighteenth floor at Rivira—the 335th-generation post town has already been repaired since the Xenos destroyed it—but maybe because we're finally able to relax our tense nerves, everyone seems exhausted. Still, there's a feeling of accomplishment and relief in their long sighs.

In order to spend the night here according to time up on the surface, we quickly set to work preparing our camp and getting ready for tomorrow's exploration.

Haruhime and Cassandra got Ouka to help them set up camp, and

they're romping around clapping their hands like kids. Mikoto and Chigusa are in charge of cooking, and Aisha is guarding the entrance. Lilly and Daphne are discussing our route as they look at a map.

Since our party is so small, all our gear fits in our backpacks, so while it's nothing like a *Loki Familia* base camp with cargo and supplies lying around, our rest point is still starting to look like a real camp.

"Hey, Bell, let me do that one, too."

"Okay, thanks."

I accept Welf's offer and hand him the Divine Knife in exchange for Hakugen, which he's just finished sharpening. Whetstones, hammers, and even a miniature furnace in a box surround him. He seems to have brought all his smith's tools on the expedition. Thanks to our High Smith, we'll be able to keep our weapons at peak performance and not lose any of their edge. It's incredibly helpful, since we can't return to the surface during the course of the expedition.

"It's such a luxury to have a smith in your familia. I doubt that even famous factions like *Loki Familia* have someone like that on hand all the time," comments Daphne, who's finished up her work.

"How's that new weapon working for ya, Bell?" Welf asks.

"It's amazing. The blade feels so good it keeps surprising me...It even cuts right through metal monsters..."

"That's 'cause I used an insanely valuable drop item that would make a healer or a mage scream if they found out. Oops, don't tell Li'l E! She'll yell at me for treating you special."

The smith's eyes are fixed on the Divine Knife, but he's grinning like a mischievous little kid who likes to play tricks. I smile back at him wryly and look down at Hakugen. The unusual white blade flashes brilliantly. I can sense that compared to the Ushiwakamaru series of weapons, which I'd been using until recently, it's far more powerful. More than that, the edge is much keener. And the best part is how light it is. The handling is incredible.

Perhaps it's not so well suited to defense or fending off attacks... but overall, I don't have any complaints.

Since it's custom made, the grip is molded to match to my fingers exactly. Even though I'm using it for the first time, it feels like an extension of me more than anything I've used before. Welf is clearly gaining mastery over his skills. I feel so proud and happy to be working together with him like this, adventurer and smith, polishing each other's abilities to ever greater heights.

It's probably thanks to Hakugen and all the other weapons and gear Welf has made for us that we've made it to the twenty-fourth floor.

...*The twenty-fourth floor...*

I mull over the number once again.

We've made it from the surface to the twenty-fourth floor in about a day. That's an extremely good pace.

No, considering the fact that we used to have trouble even reaching the twentieth floor, you could say it's *too* good.

I'm a bit afraid that things are going so well...

Why is that?...It's strange how calm I feel.

It's not simply that I'm no longer terrified of the middle levels after I reached Level 4.

It's more like...I've crossed blades with things much more terrifying—and much stronger—than anything I can expect to run into around the middle levels.

The violent hunters, for one, and my great rival for another. Those experiences have affected both my body and my soul. I'm realizing that once again as I stand here on the twenty-fourth floor of the Dungeon—which is not at all an easy place to be—and listen to the calm, measured sound of my own heartbeat.

The same goes for my improved sense of courage and my thoughts, swirling inside my head at this very moment.

I return Hakugen to its sheath and look up.

"Hey, Welf. The Divine Knife is made of mithril, right?" I ask him slowly.

"Yeah. It's a great material because of how easy it is to work with. On top of that, it conducts magical power really well. Mithril weapons are common for fighters who combine magic and ordinary combat ability."

Welf replies while he gently turns over the black blade etched with hieroglyphs.

"But just because it conducts magic easily doesn't mean it's enchanted," he continues. "Even if you beat magic into a regular knife, it just seeps out and disperses. Anyway, why were you asking?"

"Uh, I just..."

Sitting next to Welf, who's immersed once again in his work, I stare down at my right hand. Very softly, so that no one will notice, I start to sound the chime. A few particles of white light converge on my hand.

The pitched battle I fought and ultimately lost at the hands of my rival has made me more diligent. Before, I simply used my magic and skills. Now I study them.

Especially Argonaut.

I've been conducting a kind of secret test ever since I entered the Dungeon today. There are quite a few things that I've learned already. First, the maximum charge time for Argonaut is four minutes. It used

to be three minutes, so I've gained an extra minute by advancing to Level 4. The power raised by the charge increases wherever the particles of light gather, up to my action limit for attacks. This applies for slashing, punching, and magic, but I can initiate the charging at only one place at a time.

Charges and Concurrent Charges are zeroed out if an enemy attacks me or I get distracted. When that happens, the physical and mental strength that I've been amassing disappear as well. This seems to be similar to what happens with a mage's chants. Even right now, if I will the particles of light to disappear from my right hand, I instantly feel overwhelmed by exhaustion. I can restore my energy using recovery items, but it's best to save those for crucial moments and avoid constantly charging.

What I've been most interested in as a result of these tests is convergence, which is the most outstanding attribute of Argonaut.

It's—

The high magical conductivity of the knife...The convergence of my skill...

I've realized something about myself.

I'm not smart enough.

To make up for that, I'm currently relying on Lilly and some of the others. Without the support of my companions, having me be the leader of anything would be ridiculous. My title would be worthless.

I've got to use every last bit of my insufficient brain.

If I don't, I, Bell Cranell, will not amount to anything.

I won't ever be like Aiz, who's constantly adding new sword skills to her repertoire. I won't be like Finn, who spins out countless inspired strategies. I'll never get to the other side of genius.

If I don't use every last idea in my head, I'll never be able to invent anything new.

So I've been thinking and thinking until I can't think of anything else—then right when the flash of possibility shoots through my mind

—

"Everyone, dinner's ready!"

"...!"

Lilly's voice rings out from the tent.

"You heard the little lady. Let's go, Bell. I'm done with my maintenance." Welf hands me the Divine Knife.

"...Okay!" I answer, setting aside my thoughts as I stand up.

Welf and I head toward the center of the room, where Lilly and the others are waiting.

There's just one last thing to do before the evening—or rather, night—meal. We take out our knives and longswords to shave the

green Lamp Moss from the walls and ceiling, toning down the amount of light in the room. After we finish, the plant-filled green space takes on the atmosphere of a forest at night.

One reason we do this is to help adjust our internal clocks to match the time on the surface, but it's more important as a measure to prevent monster attacks. Though there is variation depending on the species, most monsters are wary of areas in the Dungeon where the light is different from usual. In this case, we've made the room dimmer than normal. At least that's what Aisha and Daphne, who have been on many expeditions, are explaining to us as we hurry to follow their instructions.

We gather the shaved-off Lamp Moss and stuff it into jars, setting them in the middle of the room. They're like lanterns lighting up our night camp.

"Well, guys, let's eat! There's plenty for seconds, too!"

"I-I hope you like it..."

We gather around the pot set next to the lanterns and begin to eat. Mikoto and Chigusa prepared risotto—or rather, an Eastern porridge dish. We're all drooling over the thick gruel studded with glistening golden threads of egg, finely torn dried meat, green herbs, and a scattering of nuts and fruit. They scoop the steaming mixture into wooden bowls, and we dig in with our spoons.

"We added some ingredients found in the labyrinth that Lady Aisha said were edible...How is it?"

"Tastes a little odd...but it's good! I like the earthy flavor, and the fruit has an interesting tartness to it. At the very least, you won't find this outside Orario."

"We don't have this in the Far East, either. It's a Dungeon original."

"Mr. Ouka, this is where you compliment the cooks...especially Chigusa!" Lilly scolds him as he and Welf make their comments while scarfing down the stew.

"M-Miss Lilly, he doesn't need to do that...! But I'm happy they like it," Chigusa says, relieved to have succeeded at her task.

Since Mikoto and I live in the same household, I know what a good cook she is, but Chigusa, who grew up under the same circumstances, appears to be just as talented. Welf and Ouka aren't the only ones who have taken a liking to their handiwork, either.

"You should quit adventuring and open a restaurant," Aisha jokes, mixing a dash of teasing in with her compliment.

Incidentally, we picked up the eggs earlier in the day when we stopped by Rivira. Bors, the head of the post town, gave them to us to celebrate our first expedition. Apparently, some of the residents brought a few chickens down from the surface. For adventurers

starving for more familiar fare, they really could be called golden eggs. The only problem is keeping them fresh.

“Um, is it okay that we used so much water...? They say having enough potable water makes or breaks an expedition. We wouldn’t want to turn back because we ran out...” Cassandra says, worried about the supplies we used for the meal.

“There’s so much water on the floors below us that you’ll practically drown in it. Nothing to worry about. Anyway, this party isn’t as big as the *Apollo Familia* parties you used to be part of. There’s no way we’ll end up fighting over water.”

Aisha responded while waving her hands carelessly as if to brush off Cassandra’s concern.

Perhaps because they’re remembering rough past expeditions, or perhaps because Aisha has nailed their concerns, Cassandra and Daphne—who are former *Apollo* members—both groan.

In the end, Cassandra is right. Conserving water may be the most crucial thing in the Dungeon.

Clear streams like the one on the eighteenth floor are generally few and far between in the labyrinth. Planning out water collection at accessible sources on specific floors is the foundation of a successful expedition. Before we set up camp here in the Colossal Tree Labyrinth, Aisha and Mikoto went to draw water at some springs, so we’re okay for now. Maybe Aisha’s relaxed confidence that even extends to matters beyond fighting is due to how many expeditions she’s been on.

“I think Bell Cranell is suited to the center of the formation. When I first heard about charge attacks, I was like, ‘Huh?’ but with that level of power, he could easily be in the rear, too. And he’s plenty fast,” Daphne says.

“In terms of personality, I don’t think Mr. Bell is cut out for the rear guard...” Lilly says.

Dinner is over, and the party is sitting in a circle talking about the day’s events and each member’s particular interests.

“Now that you mention it, he does have trouble standing still... And by the way, good job with your leadership so far.”

“Thank you.”

Since when did Daphne and Lilly develop this master-and-pupil relationship? They’re sitting around bobbing their heads at each other.

“Unlike last time, no one got a level boost. The magic swords are still waiting to be used, too,” Welf says.

“Well, we have more people this time, so our coordination and responses are faster. Of course, there’s also the fact that Master Bell and Lady Aisha are supporting the formation...” Mikoto answers.

“We’re all covering one another’s weaknesses...That’s how party

exploration *should* work,” Ouka says.

“And there I am doing nothing and holding everyone back... Ugh...” Haruhime sighs.

Next to them, Chigusa and Cassandra are having a surprisingly animated discussion about healing and first aid. The hastily put-together party seems to be getting along just fine. Everyone is chatting pleasantly.

“Hey, Antianeira. I’ve never been to the twenty-fourth floor before, but is this what it’s always like? I’m worried we’ll get careless because things are going so well,” Daphne says.

Her voice echoes with terrible loudness through the room. Everyone looks at her, which is probably what she intended. Aisha, who’s sitting on the floor with one knee propped up, shrugs.

“As long as you keep an eye out for attacks that inflict irregular ailments and you have enough people, the Colossal Tree Labyrinth isn’t too big a deal. I mean, it might be tough if you only had Level-Two people...Coming down here unprepared would also mean getting totally wiped out by traps and weird goblins that aren’t up in the Cave Labyrinth. Aside from that, obviously, it’s the amount of resources.”

The twenty-fourth floor is the lowest of the middle levels, and most consider a Level-2 status the minimum requirement to justify going there. But I’ve heard that the Guild sets those basic standards with an eye to preventing deaths caused by first-timers being caught off guard. Of course, the monsters also have more abilities at their disposal than they do on the seventeenth floor or higher.

The main thing that sets apart the Colossal Tree Labyrinth that starts on the nineteenth floor is the huge number of Irregular attacks, like ones that involve poison. Monsters also appear with greater frequency than they do on the upper floors.

But the scariest thing in the Dungeon is the limitless amount of resources it can draw on. You have to watch out for that no matter what floor you’re on.

“Below this floor...you could probably squeak by as a Level-Two adventurer down to the twenty-seventh floor. From there on, the problem is the terrain. They say that’s the reason it’s considered a separate zone that we call the ‘lower level.’”

According to the battle-hardened second-tier adventurer, that tricky terrain is also the reason that the standard for the lower floors, starting at the twenty-fifth, is Level 3.

“The thirtieth floor is where you really start to need a high level and status. There are swarms of bloodsauruses and other dangerous monsters down there. It’s like the middle level for Level Ones... They’re the kind of things that a Level-Two party has no way in hell of defeating.”

Everyone is listening to Aisha with serious expressions.

“...The thirtieth floor, huh. It’s hard to imagine what it’s like, considering we still have to get through six more floors,” Welf says.

“Speaking of which, the Guild doesn’t publish any detailed information about the lower levels, does it...?” Mikoto asks, tilting her head curiously.

“The Guild restricts information about the lower levels and the Deep Zone...especially everything below the fiftieth floor,” Lilly says quietly.

“Why would they do that?” Mikoto asks.

“Everything is *so different* down there...If people knew too much, they might lose heart. That’s what I hear,” Lilly replies. Everyone falls silent.

“Ha-ha-ha...No way—” Cassandra says, trying to laugh it off. Aisha cuts her off curtly.

“Well, as far as *Ishtar Familia* goes...We didn’t get any information about the fiftieth floor or lower, either.”

All of a sudden, Lilly’s account takes on a ring of truth. It seems that things are set up so no information about the Deep Zone is released until you get close to those floors and are qualified to access it.

“If you believe the rumors...*dragons leap between floors down there*. And that’s not the worst of it. There are herds of monsters all as strong as floor bosses.”

“...Th-that must be a lie!”

“Who knows? But even if it is, it’s a sign of how bad things are at that level.”

Chigusa gulps audibly, and silence descends on the camp. Everyone shudders as they imagine the still-unknown abyss of the Dungeon while picturing the bottomless extent of the labyrinth.

The lanterns illuminate the tight-lipped faces of the party.

“Damn...You spineless chickens are getting the shakes all the way up here?! That stuff is way in the future,” Aisha says in an attempt to lighten the mood. “Haruhime, bring out the drinks!”

“What? Lady Aisha, I didn’t bring any alcohol...!”

“Maybe not, but I snuck some into your backpack!”

The shocked Haruhime paws through her backpack and finds... exactly what Aisha said would be there.

A buzz runs through the party at the sight of the liquid in the thick bottle.

“Hey, boys! You’ll have a glass, right?”

“...When an Amazon is egging you on, all you can say is yes.”

“Mr. Welf!” Lilly says reproachfully.

“It’s okay, Li’l E, I’ll just have a sip! Think of it as a nightcap. Big

Guy, you'll have some, too, won't you?"

"You're not gonna overdo it, are you?" Ouka replies. He likes to drink and seems surprisingly willing to jump onboard.

"You talking to yourself, eh, Ouka?" Chigusa teases.

"Should we really be treating ourselves like this on the first day...?"

Cassandra is the last to speak, and her soft mumble disappears in the excitement of the impromptu party.

Haruhime, dressed in battle gear that resembles a shrine maiden's getup, looks like an alluring temptress as she fills our cups on Aisha's orders; well, she does have experience working in the Pleasure Quarter. Even Daphne, who appears astonished, and Mikoto, who's scowling, are eventually drawn in by Aisha. Cassandra tries to escape unnoticed into the tent but is forced to join the others.

Before long, someone starts laughing happily, and then others join in.

"..."

I'm watching the scene from outside the circle.

It's my turn to guard the party right now. Since the meal began, I've been sitting on the stump that Aisha had been occupying until we switched places, watching the entrance to the room. Although I have to admit, I've been using only one ear to listen for monsters. The other has been following the conversation inside.

I take a bite of porridge from the bowl in my hands and feel my eyes soften as I watch my friends. How long have I been smiling?

"Mr. Bell! How about seconds?"

"Oh, thank you, Lilly."

Somehow, she's managed to slip away from the devil's grasp and escape to where I am, pot in hand. I gratefully accept another serving.

"It's completely absurd! Getting drunk in the Dungeon, and not even at a safety point..."

"Well, we're on an expedition, so I doubt anyone is really letting loose..."

"What if a monster hears all the commotion?!"

She's right...I hunch down without answering and take another bite of porridge.

But I don't try to stop Welf and the others.

In the room that feels like a forest at night, the Lamp Moss stuffed into bottles gives off a strange blue-green glow. It's both mysterious and cozy. Fragments of light cast faint shadows of the party that dance on the walls and floor, and the plants growing on the ground wave along with them.

Camping is the real pleasure of an adventure.

I read as much from heroic tales, but to see such a scene before

my own eyes makes me happier than I can put into words.

“...Are you enjoying this, Mr. Bell? I see you’re smiling.”

Lilly is giving me a strange look from her perch by my side.

“Oh, sorry...What can I say? I’ve always wanted to camp like this with everyone.”

“But didn’t we do the same thing when *Loki Familia* saved us on the eighteenth floor?”

“I guess so...But it’s just so great.”

I scratch my cheek, feeling self-conscious, and smile wryly to hide my embarrassment.

Lilly watches me in silence. I cock my head at her.

“...I’m glad,” she mutters as her expression relaxes.

“I’ll make a confession to you, Mr. Bell...Lilly was just the slightest bit scared.”

“Huh?”

“Ever since that day, you’ve had your sights set high for the sake of Wiene and the other Xenos...I thought you’d changed.”

She’d been confused and a little afraid. She’d worried that if I set my sights so far ahead, I’d gradually drift away from the rest of the group. I fix my gaze on her as she admits her fears. Her cheeks flush, but then a dimple appears.

“But in the end, Mr. Bell is still Mr. Bell.”

As she smiles happily at me, I can’t help feeling tenderly toward her. It’s not a romantic feeling but something much kinder, like I’d feel toward a sister.

Before I know it, my right hand is reaching out toward Lilly’s head.

She starts with surprise, but then accepts my hand and sits sweetly still as I clumsily ruffle her hair.

“I’m sorry I made you worry,” I say, smiling at her to ease her concerns, like Wiene did, but—

“...No, you might have changed after all. It’s like you’ve become, how do I put it...more of a womanizer...”

“Whaaat?!”

All I get in return is criticism.

Maybe she’s mad, because her puffed-out cheeks are red and her chestnut eyes are narrowed.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry—!” I say, apologizing in a panic, since apparently it was very rude of me to pet her head.

Lilly interrupts me by giggling.

I give her a blank look, but then her mood spreads to me and I let slip a smile.

“M-Mr. Bell, would you like a drink? Not alcohol, I mean, but a drink of water.”

“Hey, Miss Haruhime, why’d you come over here? Read the mood a little, geez!” Lilly snaps at the renart, who is the second escapee from the party.

“Miss Aisha let me stop serving, so I wanted to join in the pillow talk over here...!”

“Eeegrh!! Everything you say is so obscene! Do you do it on purpose?!”

“Um, why are you arguing...?” I interject.

This fight that Lilly is provoking with Haruhime is making me sweat.

Predictably, some monsters hear the commotion. When a herd of Metal Rabbits approaches the entryway, we’re momentarily caught up in intercepting their attacks.

So goes the first night of the expedition.



After the modest drinking party ends, a quiet like the tranquility of a forest falls over the room.

When I listen carefully, I can hear the soft breath of Lilly and the other girls sleeping in the tent. Out of consideration for them, Welf and Ouka are sleeping in the open, leaning against a wall of weeds and brush. Their arms are wrapped tightly around their greatsword and ax, respectively.

UOOOON...Far down the passageway, I hear a howl. It’s probably a beast-type monster, but from the way the howl echoes, I can tell it’s far away. I decide it’s not a threat.

I’ve been on guard duty since the party. One of the bottles stuffed with Lamp Moss is at my feet, lighting up the dim entryway. As I look around, I see that the room is slowly but surely repairing itself. Just to be safe, I keep adding new gouges to the walls with my knife.

I sit down on a stump and open the broken watch Lilly lent me. It’s two in the morning. Almost time for someone to take my place.

“...?”

I hear the sound of cloth rustling and turn around.

A woman emerges from the tent and walks toward me. She has long hair and gorgeous legs. The Lamp Moss that lingers like starlight on the ceiling illuminates her sheer battle garment, reminiscent of a dancer’s outfit, and her immaculate brown skin.

It’s Aisha.

“Miss Aisha...? I thought Welf and Ouka were taking over next!”

“Obviously. I just finished my turn.”

“So what’s going on?”

“What would you do if I said I was creeping into your bed?”

I jump up from the stump and back wordlessly away from her.

“Just kidding!” Aisha says, but her smile leaves me unsure if she actually is or not.

...She’s really beautiful.

I can’t help thinking that as I stand in front of the Amazon. She’s close enough to touch and is smiling seductively. But even though she’s gorgeous, her raw sex appeal intimidates me a little. The same goes for the look in her narrowed eyes that are staring right at me.

I can’t stand the silence, so I try to make some conversation.

“Um...I should have said this earlier, but thank you, Miss Aisha... for coming along on our expedition...”

“It’s no problem. I was planning to get you to help out with one of our expeditions anyway. The timing was perfect.”

If she had added, “In exchange for helping with the Xenos situation,” I wouldn’t have had any response. Plus, despite her words, she was probably worried about Haruhime. I smile back at the rough-and-tumble woman who hates formalities. She sweeps her bangs away from her face.

“I thought your nerves might be getting to you,” she says.

“Huh?”

“That’s why I came to check on you.”

She looks away from me down the long, dim passageway.

“There’s a passageway connecting to the lower levels right over there. Tomorrow we’ll attack the twenty-fifth floor, our goal.”

“...!”

“You probably overheard our conversation, but the next level—the lower levels—they’re a whole different deal.”

The twenty-fifth floor.

For my familia and me, it’s unknown territory. This is the first time we’ll step foot in the lower levels.

This threshold is known as the Second Line, just like the First Line up in the middle levels. Even among upper-class adventurers, only a select group has ever crossed it.

“Do you know what adventurers call the zone starting on the twenty-fifth floor?”

“...No.”

“I heard the term was used in the early days of Dungeon exploration, but we still use it today...It’s called the New World.”

...The New World.

The phrase, with its implication of unknown territory, sends ripples through my chest.

The Amazon glances back toward the tent.

“If you stumble, the party stumbles. That’s the kind of party this

is.”

“...”

“So I’ll ask you one more time...Are you freaking out?”

A piece of moss comes loose from the ceiling and falls between us. If I close my eyes, the lush green smell that fills the air almost makes me think I’m not in the Dungeon at all but instead in a forest on the surface. In a forest all alone with Aisha.

I seem to hear nonexistent leaves rustling in the wind. I quietly inhale and hold my breath, then slowly answer Aisha’s question.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel afraid at all...but...”

I turn my thoughts inward. The conversation I heard earlier lingers in my ears.

—*Dragons leap between floors down there.*

—*And that’s not the worst of it. There are swarms of monsters all as strong as floor bosses.*

Within that unimaginable world is a certain person—my idol.

Beyond the New World we are about to step into.

That person stands on the front lines of the Dungeon, which I don’t doubt are nicknamed “hell.”

“But I still want to move forward.”

I quietly squeeze into a fist the hand I’ve brought to my chest.

It’s true. The truth is I am scared. No matter how hard I will myself to be strong, I can’t stop trembling.

But my desire to reach that place outweighs my fear.

Those are my feelings.

I don’t have time to freak out.

“...I like the look on your face. It’s way better than that other time,” Aisha says, narrowing her eyes. “I barely recognize you.”

Her violet garments sway, and she comes so close we’re almost touching, taking me by surprise.

“Call me when you feel like you’re on fire and you can’t cool down. I’ll lend you my body anytime.”

Her words, whispered into my ear, make me shiver. Her seductive sigh lingers around my neck as she returns to the tent, smiling.

After she’s disappeared, I let my flushed cheeks cool in the chill air of the Dungeon. My head cleared of distraction, I lower my fist.

Attacking a lower level.

My first Level-4 adventure.

I turn my mind to the coming day, when I’ll face the unknown with my companions.

CHAPTER 3

New World

~ Water Island

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CHAPTER 3

NEW WORLD ~WATER ISLAND~

The passage connecting the twenty-fourth floor with the twenty-fifth is a cave covered in crystals.

“Ice...No, crystals...”

We’ve left camp and arrived at the deepest part of the twenty-fourth floor. After killing all the monsters in the room, we gathered in front of a tree hollow that’s covered in crystals, as if just this one part of the wall had frozen over at some point.

The cave seems to swallow Lilly’s words. The cavity is dim and slopes gently downward into the distance, where a cool wind blows toward us from deep inside. The draft, absent elsewhere in the Colossal Tree Labyrinth, ruffles my hair and draws my thoughts to the next stage of our adventure.

We look at one another and, urged on by a nod from the smiling Aisha, step into the hole.

I’m standing at the head of the line. Holding one of the magic-stone lanterns that Haruhime passed out, I tread down the slope. All of us in the front and middle ranks have magic-stone lamps, but Aisha, who’s bringing up the rear, has brought along a jar of Lamp Moss instead. I move cautiously through the cavern, thinking how the slippery walls, floor, and ceiling remind me of an ice cave.

We go down, ever down into the depths of the long tunnel.

“I hear water...” Mikoto whispers.

When the end comes into view, I can see a bluish light filtering through the opening, along with the sound of water. It grows louder and louder. Soon we can tell that the water is clearly landing on something.

At this moment, I’m neither nervous nor anxious. I’m simply following my adventurer’s instincts as I search single-mindedly for the unknown beyond the light.

We reach the end of the slope and exit the cave.

“...”

I’m dumbstruck. The magnificent scene before my eyes enralls me.

It’s a terrific, thundering waterfall, surrounded by valleys and

cliffs formed from the tips of crystals.

Together with the misty spray of water, the air is full of harpies and sirens. Their songs ring out at a high pitch as their wings swoop and cut through the air in the spacious cavern.

We've arrived at a grand watery paradise.

"Wow..."

Behind me, Welf and the others stand completely still, taking in the scene. We are all dazed by this encounter with untrammelled nature in the Dungeon, but more than anything, it's the enormous waterfall directly in front of us that draws our eyes.

"This must be what they talk about, the..."

"The Great Falls..."

The whispers of Mikoto and Lilly disappear into the roaring of the water. The sound is like a cacophony of thunderclouds or a rumbling of the earth. Even standing hundreds of meders away, it makes our eardrums vibrate.

The Great Falls.

As the name implies, it's an enormous cascade that *starts* on the twenty-fifth floor. Judging by eye, it measures about four hundred meders wide and easily as many tall. Perhaps because of the reflected light, the falling water appears to be emerald blue. It's so entrancingly beautiful that for a moment, it makes us forget we're in a dangerous dungeon.

At the same time that I feel moved by the sight, however, I'm also shivering in awe—terrified awe. Directly below the crystal cliff we're standing on is a huge plunge pool. Even a first-class adventurer would die instantly if they fell down there. But what really makes me question my eyes is the fact that *the waterfall continues on past the pool*.

Just like a staircase, the falls continue on below the twenty-fifth floor.

"This insanely huge waterfall crosses floors and reaches all the way down to the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh floors. Oh, don't worry, monsters don't climb up the falls. Well, *most* don't," Aisha explains. Ouka and Chigusa gasp.

A waterfall that transcends floors. In the parts of the Dungeon I've explored so far, that would have been completely unthinkable. It's said that adventurers will constantly watch their common sense torn to shreds. This must be an example of what that really means.

The gaping cavern behind the falls must be a quarter the size of the nineteenth floor.

"How do we get to the twenty-sixth floor...? Don't tell me we're gonna climb down the cliff," Welf groans.

"No, there's a proper path. Tons of slopes and staircases, too. You take them down to that cave over there."

Aisha points to the bank of the plunge pool on the bottom of the twenty-fifth floor. Although it looks tiny from here, there's definitely a cave with a yawning entryway down there.

The twenty-fifth through twenty-seventh floors have a multistory structure. We have to ascend or descend a distance equal to the height of the Great Falls using the interconnecting passageways at the depth of the plunge pools. If we were to jump over the falls, we could probably make it to the twenty-seventh floor in a single leap, but it doesn't require much to understand that our bodies would be smashed to bits at the same time.

Unlike Lilly, Daphne, and the others who are staring downward, I look up.

The Great Falls pour out from the vicinity of the twenty-fifth floor's ceiling. Right above the top of the falls, I can see traces of the Colossal Tree Labyrinth: The roots of an enormous tree measuring five meders in diameter radiate outward.

The falls must originate there.

I look back down at the magnificent scenery.

I trembled at the sight of the Under Resort on the eighteenth floor, too, but...what I feel now is at least as moving. No matter how much I learn from my seminars with Eina, there's no stopping the feelings that well up when I lay my eyes on these places firsthand. My heart is pounding with trepidation, tension, excitement, and the shock of encountering the unknown.

Together, the three large caverns linked across three floors by a single waterfall are called the Water Capital of the Dungeon. From ancient times until today, it has been one of the great mysteries of this part of the Dungeon that adventurers call the New World.

"All right, enough gawking. Let's get a move on. If we keep standing here, those harpies hovering over there are going to attack us."

Aisha's words dispel the trance we were in and pull us back to reality. Adventurers and their supporters are mercenary folks who leap at the mention of a potential attack, and we quickly forget our amazement as we hurry to follow Aisha's instructions.

"Take that path off to your left and follow it along the wall. Of course, it's a straight shot, so you can't get lost. That cave over there will take us back to the usual labyrinth." Aisha speaks authoritatively, like she knows everything about this place. She jerks her chin toward a crystal bridge that begins right next to us.

The cliff we're standing on is nearly perpendicular to the crossing. To our right is the precipice and to our left is a path that follows the round curve of the cavern. It goes without saying there's no handrail

or anything convenient like that, so if we slip, we'll fall straight into the plunge pool.

I mentally unfurl the Guild map and take stock of our position.

The sheer cliff we're standing on is located at the far southern tip of this floor, at the end of the connecting passageway from the twenty-fourth floor. The cavern and Great Falls directly in front of us are in the center of the floor. The passageway to the twenty-sixth floor that Aisha pointed out a minute ago is on the southeast side. Like she said, we'll head west along the wall of the cavern and enter the inside of the cliff via the cave. From there we'll move in a circle from west to north, passing behind the waterfall, and then east to the underground connecting passageway at the bottom of this floor. In other words, we'll move clockwise from the south to the southeast.

We head along the cliff trail with me leading the party.

The trail is about three meders wide. To the left is the wall and to the right is a sheer drop. I'm sure Cassandra is avoiding looking to the right at all costs. In the area around the Great Falls, harpies and other bird-type monsters swim through the air, crying and screeching. Luckily, they don't seem to have noticed us yet. Fighting on this narrow path is not something I want to do, so it does seem wise to get into the labyrinth as quickly as we can. If we're attacked by flying monsters, our only options will be to respond with arrows and magic or to hunker down beneath our shields.

If I look very closely, I can see a bridge-like crystal pathway jutting out near the Great Falls.

Maybe we'll be using that path as well...

"Hey, Bell, is everything on this floor made of crystal?" asks Welf, who's right behind me. I nod.

"There are supposed to be some plants, too...but Eina told me that basically, yeah, it's all crystal," I say, looking out at the cavern to my right and the cliff wall to my left.

The precipice and the rock wall, the trail we're on, and everything else making up this floor is deep-blue crystal. The color is much richer than that of the crystals on the eighteenth floor, with faint striations in it. At first glance, it looks like ordinary rock.

Translucent white crystals of various sizes are emitting the light illuminating the floor. They're protruding from the walls and pathway like bamboo shoots, but each one emits only a small amount of light. Aside from the Great Falls, which sparkle emerald blue, everything else on the floor is wrapped in a dim blue haze.

"Haruhime, you've been here with Miss Aisha before, haven't you...?!"

"Yes, Lady Chigusa. At that time, I was stowed away with the cargo and didn't have much chance to look around, but I do remember

being amazed.”

I can hear the two girls talking behind me in the center of the formation. I glance back toward them. Chigusa is admiring the scenery, while Haruhime is swishing the rear of her robe back and forth as she walks. She must be wagging her fox’s tail.

The girls seem completely taken by this “fantasy in blue” as well. Those are the words this floor brings to my mind.

“But where do you think the water in the falls goes? I can only imagine that such a huge amount of water would quickly overflow, no matter how many floors it passes through...”

“The water here flows from the base of the plunge pools up to the surface. You’ve heard of the port town of Melen outside Orario, haven’t you? The water connects to Lolog Lake, which is located there. Of course, it’s all sealed off now, like Babel...so I bet the Dungeon sucks up a surprising amount of the water,” Aisha says in answer to Mikoto’s question.

During the Ancient Times, water monsters were said to have invaded via that route when they conquered the oceans of the surface. That’s something else Eina told me during our seminars.

As we talk, the west wall of the tunnel comes into sight, marking the end of the long cliff trail. We’ve made it to the inside of the labyrinth without having to engage in battle on the edge of the cliff.

“Let’s take a minute to go over the plan,” Lilly says.

Inside the cave, tunnels split off directly after the entrance, just like in the Cave Labyrinth in the middle levels. It’s like the gray stone structure of that floor has been remade here all in deep-blue crystal. We pause in front of the tunnels to take a short rest and discuss our plans. Lilly leads this informal meeting.

“In order to prove to the Guild that we’ve completed our mission, we need to have the following number and types of drop items: ten steel shells from blue crabs and either three aqua serpent fins or thirty raider fish fangs. For rare monster items, one secret carbuncle crystal will do it. For resources, we have to gather one thousand grads of azure stone to satisfy the requirements.”

Lilly adjusts her heavy-looking backpack and reads the memo she’s taken from her pocket.

It makes sense that so many of the items are related to the water, since this is the first watery part of the Dungeon.

“Please focus on searching for the monsters and resources I just read out. As for the extent of our exploration, we’ve already achieved our goal of reaching the lower levels, so I see no need to push on to the twenty-sixth floor.”

“In other words, you’re suggesting we spend our time thoroughly exploring the twenty-fifth floor?” Mikoto asks. Lilly nods at her.

“Yes. This is our first time in this area. We have six days left in our expedition, so Lilly thinks it best to use yesterday’s camp on the twenty-fourth floor as a base for going back and forth to the twenty-fifth floor.”

Welf and the others seem to agree with her explanation, and I don’t have any objections myself. Repeatedly entering the twenty-fifth floor from our camp on the twenty-fourth is likely a good way to adapt to the totally new environment of the lower levels.

As Eina likes to say, adventurers shouldn’t be too adventurous. We should probably take her advice on this expedition, even if it means passing through some unavoidable tough spots.

“I mentioned this before we left, but we’ll be encountering a lot of monsters that live in the water on this floor. This may sound like an unreasonable request, but please do not approach the water’s edge.”

We acknowledge these plans and warnings about the lower levels, and Lilly looks around at each of us.

“Finally, just to be sure...Does everyone have on the Undine cloth I handed out this morning?”

She looks at the new clothes we’re all wearing. My undershirt and pants, Welf’s kimono, Mikoto’s and Ouka’s Eastern-style battle clothes, Haruhime’s shrine maiden outfit...all of them have been remade in a thin light-blue material officially called “spirit protective cloth.”

It’s waterproof, exactly the opposite of the salamander wool we wore to get through the thirteenth floor. That one was linked to fire spirits; this one is linked to water spirits. We won’t be able to survive the Water Capital without this gear.

The most important thing about Undine cloth is that its protective properties become fully activated underwater. It reduces water resistance and water pressure and improves underwater movement. In other words, it will help us swim faster. I’ve heard Undine cloth called an absolute must for water quests.

Since *Hestia Familia* is the host of this expedition, we special-ordered all the Undine battle clothes from a specialty shop in Babel—not only for our own familia but for Daphne, Ouka, and the others as well. It wasn’t cheap, but fortunately we had enough savings to cover the cost. Only Aisha brought her own Undine gear.

As long as we’re wearing it, the danger associated with falling into the water goes way down.

“Can’t you see this bright blue stuff, Li’l E? Obviously we’re wearing it,” Welf says. Maybe because he’s always hostile to anything related to spirits, there’s something irresponsible about his answer.

“Didn’t I say, ‘Just to be sure’?! We spent a fortune buying this protective cloth for everyone. I certainly hope you will all make use of it and earn enough from this expedition to cover the costs! And if you

don't...!"

"M-Miss Lilly is scary!" Cassandra says, petrified by Lilly's sharp tongue. She's wearing a dress made of Undine cloth.

Incidentally, we plan to split our haul from the expedition among the participating families based on how many people each side supplied.

"Miss Aisha, am I forgetting anything?" Lilly asks, handing over the discussion to the party member with the most experience on this floor.

"Let me think..."

The Amazon rustles her blue clothes and glances at the faces of the *Hestia Familia* members.

"One of the key features of this floor is its large number not just of water monsters but of humanoid monsters as well."

She must mean sirens, harpies, mermaids, and lamias. Eina mentioned the same thing in our seminars.

"You might feel confused at first, but don't hesitate. If you're standing there wondering if a monster is about to start talking, it will take you down."

"...!"

No doubt those words are aimed specifically at *Hestia Familia*. Aisha knows about the Xenos, and she's giving us a strong warning not to waver under any circumstance. Welf, Lilly, Mikoto, Haruhime, and I nod gravely and keep our mouths shut.

"Also, be careful not to look away even if your opponent's face is incredibly ugly...Okay, break time is over. Here they come," Aisha says, wrapping up her warnings with a joke and grabbing her *podao*, which she's stuck into the ground.

Surprised by her last words, Welf and the others turn their heads and see a swarm of crab monsters with blue steel shells approaching from the far end of the cave.

"Don't overdo it just because this is your first battle in the lower levels. Just do what you always do."

Aisha's advice, shouted as she nonchalantly takes up her position at the rear, is the signal for us to attack.

The vanguard runs forward, toward our first battle in the lower levels.

The battle with the blue crabs ends without incident.

The crabs, which are categorized as metal monsters, have irregularly developed claws on either the right or left side, depending on the individual. Although their hammer-like attacks are menacing, even Level-2 adventurers like Welf are able to work together to take them down quite easily by following Aisha's advice to remain calm.

Their steel carapaces are even stronger than those of the deadly hornets, but the seams are wide, and the dexterous Mikoto and Daphne remove them in a few swift strokes. The most shocking thing for everyone is probably the surreal sight of the creatures advancing toward us head-on, instead of walking with a crab's usual sideways scuttle.

Personally, now that I've confirmed that Hakugen can tear through the crabs' steel shells, I can move forward with some confidence.

"I've got two blue crab shells and we've only just begun! This is quite the start!"

Everyone smiles wryly at Lilly, who is in a good mood due to finding some drop items so soon. We start down the crystal cave.

Our positions in the formation have not changed since the middle levels. To be safe, though, I take the lead because of my Level-4 status. Aisha, of course, is still at the tail end. As we proceed, the people in the center of the formation spread out across the path, which is at least five meders wide. Lilly acts as guide, carrying the map of the floor and keeping us on the main route.

"...I hear something mixed with the sound of the waterfall..." Haruhime whispers, her fox's ears quivering.

"Yeah, I can hear water flowing..." Daphne answers.

The sound of the Great Falls echoes ceaselessly through the crystal labyrinth like the sound of distant waves. But as the two girls whisper to each other, something changes in the passage.

"A stream..."

Just as Chigusa says, a stream is running alongside the path we're walking down. As tributaries from other passageways flow into it, it grows into what could accurately be called a river. The water is another fantastic vision, its surface sparkling deep blue as it reflects the color of the crystals.

"Streams like this run through every part of the labyrinth. Basically, though, the dry parts make up the main route, so you don't have to worry about swimming," Aisha explains to us as we stop to gaze at the water.

We start walking again. The path is more like a riverbank than a road, with the water flowing to our left. The stream is about as wide as the bank and seems quite deep. It's flowing remarkably fast. If we let down our guard and slipped in, we'd be in trouble.

"Uh, what if we fall into the stream...?" Cassandra asks, eyes wide.

"Get back on land as fast as you can. You won't die the moment you fall in, but you *will* get killed."

"Huh?"

water droplets flying and sharp fangs glittering.

“You see, if you let your guard down, this is what happens.”

“GYAA?!”

Before the fish can strike, a *podao* and a katana slice it to pieces and knock away its fangs. Aisha, a smile on her calm, cool face, and Mikoto, drenched in cold sweat as she shields Haruhime behind her back, successfully intercepted it.

Lilly and the others in the center are as astonished as Haruhime. Up front, Welf, Ouka, and I stand frozen, facing the sudden commotion in the rear.

“The monsters are constantly watching us from underwater. Take that to heart...But good job reacting, Eternal † Shadow. Seems I can leave the protection of this worthless fox to you.”

“N-no, it was so sudden, I was acting on reflex...And also, since Sir Bell is up front now, it’s my job to guard Lady Haruhime...”

Lilly, the brain, and Haruhime, the sorcerer, are simultaneously the core of our party and its weakest points. Mikoto seems to have understood that and made it her mission to prevent any harm to those two. As a result, her nerves are twice as on edge as normal.

Overwhelmed by emotion at Mikoto’s speech, Haruhime throws her arms around her, tears streaming down her face. For some reason, the rest of us clap our hands at this mini romance, or rather friendship, between the lady and the ninja.

“Uh, um, you’re welcome?” the embarrassed Mikoto says, lowering her head.

Meanwhile, maybe because she’s envious of their friendship, Cassandra quietly reaches out her hand to Daphne, but Daphne bats it away coldly, eliciting a surprised yelp from Cassandra.

“So the fish down here will jump onto land to attack us...” Welf says as we start walking again. He sounds worn out.

“What a pain.” Ouka comments as well, as if bracing himself for the worst. I silently agree with them both.

I hear that, unlike the blue crabs that inhabit both land and water, purely water-dwelling monsters spawn by breaking through the beds or crystal walls of the streams. We’re able to notice irregularities on land because we have good visibility there, but monsters that multiply underwater are harder to track. It’s also harder to sense their presence and bloodthirst. In fact, dozens of enemies could be hiding in the stream running alongside us at this very moment.

I glance toward the water. A faint black shadow disappears toward the bottom exactly as though it was sucking its teeth at me.

My nerves are going to get a serious workout until I’m used to this.

I move forward cautiously, scanning our surroundings both wet

and dry.

“Hey, what’s that...?”

Welf has noticed something.

We follow his eyes. A mass of branch-like forms is growing out of the crystal-strewn shore on the far side of the stream. Their bright coral color sparkles like a jewel. They must be...

“...Under coral? An item you can only get in the lower levels...” I say, thinking back to an illustration in the Guild’s pictorial guide to the Dungeon.

“That’s what I thought! I saw a few real ones once when I was with *Hephaistos Familia*,” Welf says excitedly. “Can’t we get some of that? I hear it makes good weapons.”

Probably because he’s a smith, Welf sometimes asks us to collect materials or drop items when we’re right in the middle of exploring the Dungeon. I want to agree, because he works exclusively for our familia, but...

“Don’t be unreasonable, Mr. Welf! Didn’t Miss Aisha just tell us how scary the water is? We cannot enter that dangerous territory!” Lilly insists firmly.

“That under coral has a gorgeous luster to it. If we brought it back to the surface, it would fetch a good price. And look, isn’t that shell hidden inside the coral an under pearl?” Aisha says.

Lilly sighs.

“Well, I suppose we don’t have a choice...! Let’s go get it!”

“Anything for money, eh, Li’l E?!” Welf scoffs.

He squeezes his hands into tight fists, and the rest of us laugh hollowly. It’s decided—we’re going to harvest one of the Dungeon’s most prized treasures.

But first, to get to the far bank, we have to cross the stream.

With Aisha’s warning fresh in our minds, swimming is not an option. But a number of crystal rocks are jutting out of the water, and by jumping from one to the next, we should be able to make it across.

Still, I catch the vague but undeniable whiff of a trap...

“By the way, I don’t think this party has a thief, but is there a scout among us? This type of work usually goes to them,” Aisha says.

A scout’s main job is reconnaissance. They go out ahead of the group to check for monsters on the path or sometimes intentionally lure them into specific areas. Since part of their job involves making use of the terrain, it’s not unusual for them to also be tasked with collecting or excavating dungeon resources.

Hestia Familia has never clearly established a scout position, but as we listen to Aisha’s question, our eyes naturally gravitate to one person.

“...It’s me, isn’t it?” Mikoto says, her black ponytail swaying.

Her Yatano Black Crow detection skill and ninja abilities make her very well suited to scouting and clandestine Dungeon exploration.

The far bank of the river is narrow and won't hold more than two. Along with Mikoto, who's been de facto selected, I'm chosen to provide support because of my speed and agility.

"Lady Mikoto, is Yatano Black Crow reacting to anything?"

"No...At the very least, the blue crabs and raider fish that we encountered earlier aren't in the vicinity. Of course, that includes the water, too."

"What are we going to do if that rocky bank is actually a crystal turtle...?"

"Your concern is well taken, Bell Cranell. I'll try shooting an arrow at it," Ouka says.

To lighten my load, I discard all but the bare essentials—my knives—and put on a backpack to load with the items we collect. Haruhime hands Ouka a bow and arrow, and he shoots at the crystals to make sure they're not a monster in disguise. They're not, so Mikoto and I leap from the shore.

Kicking off the tops of the crystal rocks, we fly through the air. Mikoto, who's ahead of me, moves ninja-like across the stream, drawing surprise from Welf and the others who are watching from the shore with arrows and ropes at the ready.

"This is our first time working as a team of two, is it not, Sir Bell?"

"Now that you mention it...back when we were dealing with *Ishtar Familia*, we went off in different directions right away."

We start collecting under coral as soon as we arrive at the crystal-rock shore. Mikoto cuts off pieces at their base with her dagger, and I load them into the backpack. Incidentally, under coral is a different species from surface coral. I've heard it's as hard as a mineral.

"Please get the pearl, too!!" Lilly shouts from the far shore. We follow her orders and locate the fist-size shell concealed inside the mass of branch-like coral.

Under pearls are sometimes called "rainbow jewels" because they shine with a dazzling array of colors. We harvest it, pure-white shell and all.

"Shall we head back? Nothing good will come of excessive greed."

Our pack stuffed with the Dungeon's riches, we quickly finish up our task and step off the rocky shore, where a large mass of under coral still remains.

But as we might have expected, the Dungeon is the Dungeon.

It's not going to let a couple of adventurers who just stole its treasures get away without a fight. The water's surface explodes violently.

“Whoa—that was huge!!”

“An aqua serpent!”

As Welf and Lilly scream from the far shore, Mikoto and I stop breathing. The monster is enormous. It has light-green scales and a snake’s head, and is clearly a large-category monster. The formidable head with fins protruding from it reminds me of a dragon. According to information collected by the Guild, aqua serpents can grow up to ten meders long!

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

The monster has emerged directly in front of us in the middle of the stream, as if to block our way forward. Its motions send waves through the water as it glares at us and opens its jaws.

It drops its head—which was raised so high it scraped the ceiling—toward Mikoto, who is ahead of me.

“Miss Mikoto!”

“Mikoto?!”

The flow of time slows to a crawl as Haruhime and I both cry out. But before Ouka can loose an arrow from the shore, or Aisha can ready her *podao*, or I can shoot a Firebolt from my extended right hand, Mikoto herself takes action.

“Ngh!”

She makes a perfect landing on the crystal rock even though it is hidden by the waves, then leaps off again, spinning *forward* through the air.

Aiming for the aqua serpent’s lowered jaws, she kicks up her toes.

“—GAA?!”

A hard blow from Mikoto’s right foot sends the serpent’s head flying upward and breaks off two of its fangs.

It takes me a few seconds to stop gaping and realize I’ve just witnessed ninja martial arts in action.

“A s-somersault...” Daphne whispers, grimacing.

Her words snap the sluggish flow of time back to its normal pace.

The instant Mikoto falls into the stream, Aisha tosses her a rope, and I rush forward belatedly toward the monster’s long, undulating body. The serpent has plenty of vulnerable points, and as we cross paths, I slice its body in half with the Divine Knife.

“Yah!”

“—?!”

The serpent sinks into the water, its death throes beating up powerful waves. The move almost seems intentional, like a final attack aimed at me. I’m already off-balance from the excess momentum of running forward, and the waves almost sweep me into the stream. Somehow, though, I manage to kick off a rock and land on the shore where Welf and the others are standing. Mikoto, too, has

been pulled ashore with the rope.

“M-Miss Mikoto, when did you learn to do that...?”

“A-actually, I was training with Sir Takemikazuchi before the expedition and he taught me some new martial arts...They came in handy right away, I guess...”

“That was amazing, Mikoto!”

“Yeah, you’ve been rocking this whole trip!”

I smile at her from my position on all fours, dripping wet. She wipes her face and smiles faintly back at me, as if to say she’s just narrowly escaped death. Aisha and Chigusa are praising her unreservedly, and the whole party is wrapped up in a fever of excitement.

The excitement lingers after we move from the flooded main route to a small room a slight distance away. Everyone peers curiously at the contents of the backpack that I’ve placed on the ground.

“So much under coral, and an under pearl on top of that...!”

“I’d wager there’s at least three million valis’ worth in there!”

“If you play your cards right with the tradesmen, you can probably get three and a half.”

“Th-three and a half...?! So this is the value of the lower levels...!”

“I can pay back the loans I took out for the weapons in one go...!”

“O-Ouka, you can’t have it all for yourself!”

“This is a great achievement, Miss Mikoto and Mr. Bell!!”

Cassandra, Daphne, Aisha, Haruhime, Ouka, Chigusa, and Lilly cheer when they see the haul of coral and pearl sparkling inside the bag. All Mikoto and I can do in response to all this clapping and praise is scratch our cheeks self-consciously.

“It’s starting to feel like a real expedition, isn’t it?” Welf says, throwing an arm around my shoulder.

“...Yeah!” I say, returning his smile.

Expeditions promise high returns in exchange for high risk. I’ve learned the meaning of those words firsthand by retrieving these treasures.

As I stand there laughing excitedly with my friends, something different from my desire to grow stronger rises in my chest... Something that makes me remember the innocent child’s heart of my earliest days in Orario. Back then, I was completely wrapped up in the fun of the quest. The events of a few months ago feel like ancient history, but I’ve rediscovered my old excitement for adventure.

On the other hand, to have been attacked by an aqua serpent so soon...

Even as I’m smiling with everyone else, a warning bell is ringing softly in my adventurer’s heart.

It's fine to enjoy ourselves to the fullest during happy moments. But when it's time to switch gears, we really have to get our heads in the game. I'll never be like Finn, but I should at least be able to overcome my carelessness and conceit. I'm the one responsible for leading our party. Quietly, I focus my mind.

From now on, I'll be anticipating the excitement of a new floor, along with the challenges of exploring watery terrain, and the quick wits that requires.

Over and over, I review in my mind the information I learned about the lower levels, and the face of the person who helped me learn it.



I hope Bell is okay...

The boy's face was a constant image in Eina's mind.

She was in Guild Headquarters on the surface, where the midday sun was shining brightly.

It was break time, and having finished her lunch, Eina was looking down at a parchment spread out on her desk, chin propped in her hands. At the neighboring desk, her coworker Misha Frot was sighing over the mountain of paperwork that had forced her to give up her break.

I don't think he can possibly have reached the lower levels yet...Ah, I wish I had pulled out more of the second-tier adventurer material for him!

It was the second day since Bell and his party had left on their expedition. Eina figured they were probably still making their way through the Colossal Tree Labyrinth. She looked down at the scroll.

The upper levels were different from the middle levels. That was what adventurers often said to one another. Likewise, the middle levels were different from the lower ones. Eina had tried to teach Bell everything she could, but perhaps due to the earnest elf blood in her, she couldn't help feeling now that she could have done more.

As she read the words on the parchment, she sighed several times.

"Eina, if you've got time on your hands, maybe you could help me. Think you could do that?"

"Nope, no way. You need to do it properly on your own."

"Ugh!...By the way, what are you looking at?" Misha said, hanging her head and glancing at Eina's desk. The scroll Eina was reading listed incomplete quests in the middle and lower levels.

"Hmm...I feel like a lot of adventurers are going missing lately. Especially in the lower levels...That's where Bell's party is headed,

and it's making me a bit worried."

The quests listed on the scroll were all requests to search for adventurers who had disappeared in the Dungeon. Hestia had filed a similar request when Bell and his companions failed to return from their first venture into the middle levels and she became anxious about them. Eina suspected some root cause was behind the fact that adventurers were not returning from the lower levels.

Misha stopped moving her feather pen in response to her friend's worry and gazed at her inexpressibly anxious face.

"...Hey now, isn't that the usual situation?"

"Huh?" Eina said, unsure what to make of Misha's point.

"I hate to say this, but...not a day goes by when a report isn't filed about an adventurer missing in the labyrinth."

The Dungeon claimed victims on a daily basis. Any Guild employee knew that. It was even truer with regard to the hard-to-clear lower levels.

"Plus, Eina, weren't all those search quests filed quite a while ago...?"

Eina suddenly realized Misha was right. She'd definitely seen this quest before...and this one...!!

But only now was she pulling out all the search requests, listing them up, and sighing each time she looked at them. Only now, when *Hestia Familia* had left on an expedition.

What must Misha think of her?

The moment the thought entered her head, Eina's face grew hot.

"No, but really, I do feel like there's been a lot lately! I-I'm not pulling out these documents because I'm anxious about Bell or anything like that...I-I'm not even worried about him!"

That was a lie. Bell was the only thing on her mind. She was definitely being overprotective...or rather, overanxious. Until recently, she had never become this restless when Bell went to the Dungeon.

It must be because of the expedition! Yes, it's the expedition's fault! It's because this is so different from ordinary exploration, where a high level of safety is guaranteed.

That was what Eina told herself. If she didn't fool herself in this way, she wouldn't have been able to get anything done. But her close friend Misha saw right through her psychological conflict and rapid-fire excuses.

"Now, Eina..."

"What?"

"You looked strange the other day, too. Is it possible that your feelings for your little brother are—?"

"No way!!"

Eina cut off Misha's words with a loud denial.

Everyone in the office looked at them, wondering what the fuss was all about. Normally, the mischievous Misha would have poked fun at Eina, but one look at her red cheeks told her what was going on. Misha's face took on the mature expression of an older sister or mother.

"Eina, your little brother...Bell...is five years younger than us. Okay, it may have nothing to do with age, but still, an adviser and her adventurer...Most of the time, that kind of thing ends tragically...I know it's possible for humans and half-humans to have children...but still..."

"Stop giving me such a serious lecture!"

Eina couldn't help screaming at Misha, who was trying to give her a gentle talking-to. She didn't care about the strange looks she received from the other receptionists or the stares of the Guild staff. It grated on her unbearably to have her friend—who was usually the one who needed to be looked after—worrying about her so earnestly. Finally, she threw her head down on the desk with a thud, hoping to at least hide her burning red face.

"Erghhhh!!"

All she could manage was an agonized groan. She raised her delicate eyebrows as she let Misha's gentle lecturing voice flow past her ears.

I've made up my mind...and I won't change it.

When Bell returned, she'd have him take her out to dinner to make up for this. She promised herself that. It would definitely not be a date or a mixing of private and public matters. In her mind, she saw Hestia appear as a resentful angel of reason, but Riveria, the master of will, put up a barrier to protect the emotional Eina as she crouched low.

Eina's emerald eyes were just the slightest bit moist as she gazed down at the parchments scattered on her desk. She scratched her finger lightly across the bundle of quests representing prayers for the safety of loved ones.

"That's why you have to come back..." Eina mumbled softly.



Compared to the yawning cavern of the Great Falls, the inside of the cliff, where the labyrinth is located, is a lot like a high-rise apartment building.

Like Aisha said, there are lots of staircases and slopes. Whenever I start to feel we've been going down for a long time, we go up again. I'm getting a real sense of its multilayered construction. I guess we

have to go up and down like this over and over to reach the equivalent of the apartment building's first floor—that is, the passageway to the twenty-sixth floor, which is located on the southeast side of the cavern.

As for exploration itself, we've had quite a few close calls. At one point a huge geyser burst through the ground, stopping our progress, and when we tried to get around it via another route, a monster party appeared. Then Daphne absolutely refused to take the crystal bridge that goes right past the Great Falls. Another time, one of Welf's arms got stuck on a drug octopus's sucker, and he almost fell into the rapids. But despite the constantly shifting circumstances, we're managing to make our way down the main route through the twenty-fifth floor.

Right now, we're in the labyrinth in the northern section of the floor. If we follow the stream due south, we'd arrive at the Great Falls. According to Lilly, who's reading the map of the twenty-fifth floor with its many drawings of the various layers, we're not even halfway down the main route. We still have a long way to go. While we take our third rest of the day, we decide to go a little farther and then turn back toward the twenty-fourth floor. We start moving forward again.

"...?"

As we proceed down the dim passageway lit by faintly glowing white crystals sticking out from the floor, I see something. Since I'm at the front of the party, I notice it first, but soon Welf sees it, too.

"Is that...an adventurer?" he says.

Indeed, the silhouette slowly approaching from straight ahead does seem to belong to a human. Long, thin ears protrude from either side of the downturned face...It looks like an elf.

I can just barely guess its race by squinting down the dim passageway.

"We haven't met one of our own for a while. Even in the middle levels, we weren't seeing many adventurers."

"It must be someone powerful. No other familia was scheduled for an expedition at the same time as ours...Lilly thinks only a second-tier adventurer or higher would venture this far for ordinary exploration."

As Ouka and Lilly talk behind me, the figure of the approaching adventurer grows more distinct by the second. It's dressed in high-quality leather armor, with a quiver at its hip. I spot a familia crest.

The gear is familiar. I know this person.

I'm pretty sure it's...Luvis?

I came into contact with him almost two months ago, when I was serving as Eina's bodyguard. He's the upper-class elven adventurer who, along with the dwarf Dormul, was pursuing Eina night after night, egged on by his patron deity. I can't yet make out his face very

well because of the shadows, but I'm certain it's him.

...What's he doing all alone on this floor?

I've heard he's Level 3, but this is extremely dangerous behavior. Even if he is second tier, I'd have a hard time saying he took all the necessary safety precautions unless he came down here with a party.

Plus, why is he carrying a quiver but no bow? And are my eyes deceiving me, or is his armor covered in scratches and rips? The back of my neck tingles.

A moment later, confusion turns to uneasiness.

"...Everyone, assume a defensive posture! Something feels wrong."

"Huh?"

At almost the same instant, I take my stance and Aisha warns the others to do the same.

He's staggering like he could fall at any second.

Actually, he looks like a zombie.

The party reacts with a mixture of confusion and tension to the ominously unsteady form emerging from the dim passageway. Lilly holds her breath.

Finally, Luvis comes to a point directly below one of the white crystals in the ceiling.

Slowly, he raises his face.

"Ah...Oh...?!"

The light has exposed a figure completely covered in blood.

"...!!"

"Wha—?!"

Every member of our party gapes at him in surprise. But the blood isn't the biggest shock. What renders Lilly and the others speechless is the fact that *Luvis's right arm is missing*.

The upper arm is still there, hidden in the shadow of his body, but everything from the elbow down is gone. Luvis stretches his still-intact left arm out toward us.

"He...el...!"

He collapses onto the ground as he utters a fragment of a word.

As if to take his place, a large monster emerges from the darkness.

Green. That's the only word I can find.

The human-shaped body is two meders high, and every bit of it is covered in moss. Over the moss, tree roots form a kind of protective covering. The monster looks like a giant covered in full plate armor. The fact that its head brings to mind a bald human likely plays a role in that impression. Judging from the short, hornlike pieces of wood protruding from its head, though, it's probably closer to an ogre. The two huge, emotionless eyeballs glitter yellow.

Its rough left hand grips a nature weapon—a crystal mace that

gives off a deep-blue light.

Its right hand grips *a human arm*.

Luvis's right arm, torn from his body.

"Ahh...!"

Haruhime lets out a brief scream at the unpleasant sound of the arm being squashed in the monster's hand.

The blood dripping onto the crystal pathway. The cruelty of the torn-off arm. We all stand frozen and wordless before this shocking scene. I feel like my hair is standing on end.

The hideous monster silently stretches its gore-drenched hand toward Luvis, who's still lying on the ground.

"Stop!!"

I charge full-force toward this unknown being.

In an instant, I am beside it, on the verge of slicing through it—when the monster's yellow eyes roll angrily toward me.

"..."

The crystal mace in its left hand swings down next to me with incredible force.

—It's fast!!

"!!"

I hurl myself forward to avoid the flash of light that carves a whining path through the air. The mace passes above my head, which is nearly touching the ground, and slams into the Dungeon wall directly next to me.

There's a thunderous roar, and the ground shakes. The crystal wall makes a screaming sound as fissures race through it from ceiling to floor, and the whole passageway quakes.

"Crap!!"

Welf and the others are yelling in astonishment behind me. I'm shocked, too, by the unexpected speed and force of the blow, but I move straight from my doubled-over posture into an attack.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse a few strands of white hair floating through the air, fragments of the crystal wall scattering like rain, and the monster's nearly closed eyes. This time I thrust Hakugen—gripped in my left hand—upward from its low position.

The fiercely powerful flash of white light seeks the monster's midriff—but misses by a hairbreadth as the giant steps unexpectedly backward.

"...!"

—It reacted again!

This is not a coincidence. It's foreseeing my attacks.

The superfast attacks of a Level-4 adventurer who is not holding back!

This monster can't be—

The tip of my knife grazes its body, sending fragments of moss flying toward me like enemy blood. My eyes meet the yellow eyes of the monster.

In those eyes, I detect not the raw instinct of a rampaging beast but, instead, the will to fight, heavy with a kind of muddy lust. That, and an intelligence that is observing my every move.

In our brief second of combat, I also sense the monster's high potential.

It's beyond comparison with any other monster I've fought in the Water Capital today.

In other words...

...it's an enhanced species!!

My mind shrieks silently as it recognizes a skill level and decision-making ability far beyond what one would expect on this floor.

"OOO...!"

As if to affirm my conjecture, the monster sticks out its red tongue and licks its lips.

Using the momentum from the knife thrust that met nothing but air, I release a spinning kick at waist level. This time my right leg, thrust out like a spear, makes contact with my enemy's body and succeeds in pushing it away from where Luvis lies on the ground.

"Don't push him too far, boy!"

"We're coming!"

As the mossy giant is forced to retreat about five meters, Aisha shouts at me sharply, and I hear Welf's and Mikoto's approaching footsteps.

A rustling sound comes from the monster's body, and in an instant the wounds from Hakugen disappear under newly grown moss. The giant looks past me to the members of the party running toward us.

Then, I'm quite sure, it narrows its eyes.

The next moment, it stretches its huge arms out in front of me as I stand in a defensive position guarding Luvis.

What is it about to do? My tension level jumps even higher. I hear a horrible cracking noise as small bumps rise all over the surface of the huge body.

They're on its arms, shoulders, neck, torso, legs...everywhere.

I could swear it was about to *shoot something*. A chill runs through me.

"...away..."

At my feet, Luvis is trying to say something. The wounded adventurer is summoning his last scrap of energy in order to warn me.

"Get away! Don't try to block it!!"

As Luvis utters those words, dozens of pointy bullets—*seeds*—shoot out from the monster's body.

“Huh?!”

It’s an unbelievable firearm.

Not flames, not snow, but a barrage of seeds rains down on me. They’re not all coming straight on, either—they’re coming from above, below, left, and right. They’re bouncing off the walls of the passageway and attacking me from every angle.

—They’re ricocheting!!

I can’t even track them all because there are so many, flying across my field of vision at random angles. Worst of all, they’re being released at extremely close range. I have no choice but to follow Luvis’s advice.

I abandon my defensive stance, throw appearance to the wind, and leap to the side. As I jump, I grab Luvis’s body and fly with him into the shadows of a crystal mass to our right.

“Haruhime!! Put on your robe!”

“Eeyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!”

Seeds are reaching the other members of the party now. Aisha shrieks her warning just before they hit. Ouka and Welf, who are in the vanguard, crouch down and manage to raise their shields to deflect some of the seeds. But they can’t stop them all. Mikoto and Daphne go pale and turn away. Aisha leaps out, waving her *podao* to protect the supporters directly behind her. Haruhime, her tail quivering, lies facedown on the ground with Lilly, both of them covered by the Goliath Robe.

“—Aaah!”

Welf and the other adventurers manage to withstand the rain of bullets, and the steel wall of the Goliath Robe is protecting the helpless supporters, but one voice rings out.

Chigusa.

Unable to dodge completely, she’s been hit in the shoulder with a projectile. Her legs collapse under her and she sinks to the ground.

I can’t stand to watch this scene from the sidelines. I leap from the shadow of the crystal mass into the passageway, where the fierce barrage has now stopped.

The monster is staring at me with arms limp at its sides. I’m about to lunge at it with knife outthrust, when—

“—”

“Huh?!”

The mossy giant stomps the ground powerfully, then disappears into a tunnel in the wall.

It’s escaped—no, retreated?!

A monster, retreating?!

As I stand in shock with knife raised, I hear a scream from behind me.

“Chigusa! What’s the matter?!”

“Ohhh, aaaah...!”

As I turn around, I doubt my eyes for a second time.

Ouka is kneeling on the ground with Chigusa in his arms. Her eyes are squeezed shut as if in great pain, and ivy is growing from her shoulder.

It trails from her right shoulder over her arm and chest, crawling inside her battle dress as if to violate her soft skin. The green vine even sucks up the drops of sweat that drip down the back of her neck.

“A plant growing from the wound...?! Ch-Chigusa?!”

As Mikoto’s distraught words sink in, I stare at Chigusa. So that seed bullet is the cause of this—?

Gaping in surprise, I glance back toward Luvis, who I’ve left slumped in the shadow of the crystal mass.

I hadn’t noticed before in the dim light, but now I see. Like Chigusa, a tangle of ivy encircles his body.

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CHAPTER 4
A HUNTER AT THE WATER'S EDGE



CHAPTER 4

A HUNTER AT THE WATER'S EDGE

“Chigusa, keep holding on!!”

Ouka's cries ring out again and again.

We are in a crystal room in a corner of the labyrinth on the twenty-fifth floor. After the mossy giant unleashed its fierce attack, we retreated to this room to avoid fighting any other monsters. We quickly scarred the walls and stationed a guard at the entrance, and are now trying to heal Chigusa and Luvis.

“Oh sunlight, may you beat back ruin. Soul light.”

Cassandra, our healer, is working her magic on Chigusa and Luvis as they lay on the floor. The staff Chigusa holds beside her is glowing with a warm light that resembles sunlight, wrapping the injured in its embrace. This exceedingly rare form of healing has the power to close any type of bloody wound...but the ivy that is tormenting Chigusa and Luvis does not disappear.

To the contrary, the light of the healing magic seems to spur on its growth, so that it becomes even more vigorous and sprouts lush leaves.

“Ooh, oooooh...!”

“Th-this is no use! I can't get rid of the ivy...! There's nothing I can do to fix this!” Cassandra shrieks as she stands over the sweating, groaning Chigusa.

We've already tried all the potions and antidotes. All of them were useless. We can't get rid of the ivy growing from the wounds. When we tried to tear out the vines by force, Chigusa and Luvis shrieked in pain, and when we cut them with our swords, new ones grew to replace them.

Cassandra is at a loss, her voice wavering.

“Most likely, the seeds that entered their bodies have put down roots and are feeding off their strength...So potions and antidotes do the opposite of what we want...”

“Are you saying there's no chance of recovery?!” Ouka asks, leaning over Chigusa.

“More precisely, I think, the vines will suck the strength from their bodies as they recover...” groans Daphne, who is standing next

to Ouka with a gloomy look on her face.

If it was just a question of wounds, they would already be healed. But if they're being robbed of their vitality second by second, then there is no way they can continue to fight. Not only that—in the worst-case scenario, life itself becomes...

Mikoto has her back turned to the rest of us as she uses Yatano Black Crow to guard the entrance, but she can't hide her concern. Every few seconds she glances back toward Chigusa.

"This isn't within the dimension of healing, is it? It's like the monster is parasitizing them," Welf says.

"Exactly...a parasitic plant," Lilly says. Ouka and the others turn pale at their words.

"Chigusa...!" the teary-eyed Haruhime says, gripping the hand of her childhood best friend.

Through all of this, I've been listening silently to the conversation. I look at Luvis.

Like Chigusa, his face is wet with sweat. His right arm has been wrapped in cloth to heal it, but it's hopeless to think he'll be able to recover the forearm. On top of the fact that the monster crushed it beyond all recognition, it's already starting to rot. Reconnecting it is simply not an option.

"Oh, ahh...!"

Trapped in a nightmare of pain even as he lays unconscious, Luvis squeezes his tightly shut eyes into a grimace. It's fair to say that this one-armed man's career as an adventurer has been cut short. He'll either have to retire or soldier on with a heavy handicap.

To be honest, I've talked with Luvis only a handful of times. I have no idea what kind of person he is or even what his goal is in exploring the Dungeon. Still...it's more of a shock than I expected to witness someone I know fall into an irrecoverable situation like this.

The reality of the Dungeon and its dark labyrinth is that it yields brilliant success on the one hand and a constant stream of victims on the other.

As this truth confronts me, a shiver passes through my body. If I had encountered a situation like this when I first arrived in Orario, I might well have been reduced to a pale, quaking mess.

But now...

I quietly squeeze my hands into fists as I stand before my one-armed fellow adventurer. I look up. Next to me is Cassandra, her arms limp at her sides, overwhelmed with disappointment.

"I've never seen anything like these symptoms...! There's just nothing I can do...!"

Perhaps because she has lost hope in herself as a healer in the face of these mysterious symptoms, which are due to neither "irregular

ailments” nor curses, Cassandra’s calm, drooping eyes pool with tears.

“How can we save Chigusa and Luvis?” I say, forcibly breaking into her daze. My tone is so strong it shatters the fretful atmosphere hovering around the party and surprises even me.

“Huh...?”

“Please give me your opinion as a healer, Miss Cassandra, even if it’s just a hunch.”

She’s kneeling, so I get down at eye level with her and grip her right hand with my left. Squeezing it to give her courage, I speak slowly to the teary healer.

“No one is dead yet.”

“...!”

“Everyone is here. If we think about this together, we can save them.”

The eyes looking into mine widen. I stare resolutely back, and Cassandra’s cheeks suddenly flush. When I release her hand, she looks a little bashful and presses her left hand to her heart as if to hold it in place. I can sense that Lilly wants to say something, but for the time being, she’ll have to wait. Cassandra shifts her gaze back and forth and answers me timidly.

“W-we can either rush them back to the surface and have them seen by a better healer than me...someone like the Dea Saint of *Dian Cecht Familia*...”

“Yes?”

“Or...if we kill the creature that planted the seeds in them...”

I nod at Cassandra, who, despite her lack of confidence, has shared her own ideas quite clearly. I smile at the same time, to show her my gratitude.

“Does anyone else have an idea? Please speak up if you do.”

“Sir Bell...”

“Bell, you...”

“I’m an idiot who can’t do anything but fight, and right now I’m useless...I need all of you to help me, for the sake of Chigusa and Luvis.”

I look around at the group as I speak. Lilly and Welf seem surprised.

Items and magic have failed to restore the two adventurers. On a Dungeon quest, that’s a death sentence. Every adventurer feels the terror of that in their very bones. Anyone would panic if their only means of recovery failed while they were in the Dungeon.

I’m trying to sweep away that feeling of panic. Even in form only. Even if my confidence is an illusion.

I’m playing the role of leader. That, I am certain, is my function right now. Like I said to Cassandra, my only way to break through this

is to rely on my companions, however irresponsible that may be.

I'll do what I can, and as for what I can't, I'll rely on them without regret. There's nothing shameful about it. After all, that's what a party is for.

Maybe because she's admiring me, or maybe just because she's happy, Lilly smiles as I admit my own weakness and call on the group for help.

"Leave it to us, Mr. Bell. Whatever Mr. Bell cannot do himself, Lilly and her companions will help him with!" she says.

"Like Bell said—let's talk constructively about this. If we put our brains together, we can probably find a way out," Welf says.

"Yeah, time is running short," Ouka adds. Daphne and the others nod.

"...I'm turning into a mere decoration over here!" Aisha murmurs out of the side of her mouth. She looks like she's disappointed that her starring role has been stolen. But an instant later, she's smiling and poking me in the back with her elbow.

"Hey, you managed to speak up! You're really growing up," she says. I smile wryly as I stumble forward and turn my attention to my own thoughts.

The deities have told me so many times that I've "grown." I'm certain that the root of this growth is determination. My resolve is becoming stronger. My resolve to be a hypocrite.

Or maybe it's my acceptance that I might end up losing my arms or legs, like Luvis here right in front of my eyes.

I think I may not have had enough of this "resolve" before. I'm not discounting the promise I made to my grandfather to try to pick up girls in the Dungeon. Still, I was caught up in the first volume of a colorful hero's tale. I wanted to become a character in one of those flashy stories.

But that's not what it's about. Heroes—like everyone else—have moments when they tumble to the depths of darkness. They lose people's trust, they lose their fame, they lose all hope.

Even at this very moment, I'm sure lots of people are suffering setbacks. Healers like Cassandra, and warriors who protect their companions, and sorcerers who weave songs for others.

Vows are broken again and again. I'm sure there's not a vow in the world that hasn't been broken.

But some people are bad at giving up, and those people bring their vows back to life time and again.

These people who resolve to do something, and who move forward even as they wipe their tears—they're called "adventurers."

Because a desire, I'm sure, becomes far stronger and far more impudent when it is reborn.

Just like me.

With my resolve etched in my heart, I'm moving forward, even if only a few steps.

I shift my focus back to the external world. Lilly and the others are swiftly reviewing our options.

"I think our only real choices right now are the ones Cassandra mentioned."

"So, either take the wounded back to the surface or kill the monster."

"Lilly thinks the first option, to take them back to the surface, is best."

The brains of our operation is at the center of the conversation.

"Lady Lilly, why do you feel that way?" Mikoto asks, still keeping an eye on her guard duties.

"Ten to one, that monster is an enhanced species. Most likely, it's consumed a considerable number of magic stones. Judging by its fight with Mr. Bell, it's definitely at least a Level Four. Not the type of thing you'd expect to encounter on the twenty-fifth floor. We have no idea how many techniques it has on top of those seed bullets...Trying to conquer it is just too dangerous," Lilly answers without hesitation.

An enhanced species. That's the name for monsters that kill their own kind and consume the magic stones of their prey in order to boost their own abilities. Roughly speaking, Lido and the other Xenos fall into that category as well. Monsters that have nurtured their potential on the principle that the strong consume the weak are viewed as Irregulars, and when extraordinarily strong individuals appear, the Guild places bounties on them and issues subjugation orders. I've heard quite a bit of damage occurs each time those orders are carried out.

"By the way...what type of enhanced species could that plant monster possibly be?" Welf asks. I mentally flip through the pages of the pictorial guide to the Dungeon.

"I think it might be a moss huge. They live in the middle levels, not the lower levels..." I say.

The moss huge is a type of rare monster that appears on the twenty-fourth floor. Their bodies are made of moss, which means they are plants in the shape of humans. Normally they don't have the wooden armor we saw, and they can't break Dungeon walls with superhuman force. That's why I didn't recognize it at first.

The main distinguishing feature of a moss huge is its ability to produce replicas of itself that lack magic stones when they are cut. Apparently, a lot of adventurers have talked about how they thought they killed one, only to find it was a replica and the real monster had escaped. They're not so much bellicose monsters as highly intelligent

ones that make ample use of mimicry, ambushes, and getaways...Most likely, by repeatedly consuming magic stones, this individual transformed both its physical and mental state.

By doing so, it gained the ability to descend to the lower levels and seek out higher-quality magic stones.

"A low-level monster that enhanced itself by descending to lower floors...So that type of Irregular exists, huh?" Daphne says, drawing her eyebrows together.

It's the exact opposite of a typical Irregular, which becomes a threat by ascending from a lower floor to a higher one, like the minotaur that attacked me in the upper levels.

"Getting back to the subject at hand, as I said, fighting an enhanced species is risky," Lilly says. "But our biggest problem is that, since the twenty-fifth floor is so much larger than the floors in the middle levels, there's no guarantee we'll find it again. To the contrary, finding it will be a real challenge. And if that's the case, Lilly would prefer the more certain option."

Her first priority is the safety of the party, and she is not budging on her position. What she says makes sense. But as I'm listening to her, Luvis—who's still lying prone on the ground—opens his eyes into thin slits.

"No...that monster will definitely...show itself again," he says haltingly.

"Mr. Luvis! You're awake!"

"So it's the Little Rookie...or is it Rabbit Foot now? I never thought *you'd* be saving me..."

He looks up at me, and his sweat-drenched face breaks into a wry smile. Then he glances at his missing arm, and the elf's refined face is distorted by despair and sadness. He looks in disgust at the vines crawling over his other arm, shoulders, and right leg, before finally returning his gaze to me.

"My party has been left behind on this floor...I beg you...save my brethren and destroy that detestable monster."

As our party digests this surprising entreaty, Aisha raises her eyebrows in astonishment.

"Elf, you're telling me you left your companions in the lurch and ran away?"

"Don't be an idiot! Do I look like someone who would abandon my brethren...?! No, I was the decoy..."

Maybe it's pride in his species that makes Luvis explode with anger even as he is gasping for breath.

"Please don't strain yourself!" Cassandra says in a tizzy as she tries to calm him. Lilly brings her head down next to Luvis's.

"What do you mean by 'decoy'? And a minute ago, when you said

it would show itself again...”

Luvis squints at the prum, who is trying to make sense of the situation as quickly as possible. Then, his long golden hair plastered to his neck, he draws a fist-size bag from his pocket with Cassandra’s help.

“That thing is hunting down adventurers...because it wants this.”



Let us call that monster “he.”

When he was spawned, he was weak.

Even if he raged as his monster’s instinct told him to, the humans who barged through the Dungeon trounced him handily. They pierced him with swords, burned his skin with flames, and sent him flying with hammers. It was almost a miracle that he hadn’t died in those early battles.

There was no question about it; he was the one being robbed.

But he did have just the tiniest bit more intelligence than his brethren. Time and again, he would use them as decoys or gather all his abilities to escape the surface dwellers in some other way. His fate was a fiercely burning anger that drove him to continue attacking people without becoming discouraged and, somehow, to survive.

His turning point arrived unexpectedly.

One day, he got into a fight not with a human but with one of his brethren. Somehow—maybe by unintentionally tearing off a piece of his opponent’s body—he invoked its wrath. Death-hating creature that he was, he resisted fiercely, and ended up ripping his opponent’s windpipe to shreds with his jaws. He kept going and bit his opponent’s body all over until it was destroyed.

And then, chest and all, he devoured the core of his brethren’s being.

He shivered when he bit into the purple crystal. A flash of light ran across his field of vision. It was the breaking of a taboo, the ultimate forbidden act.

Power burst from his entire body. Stimulation flooded his every nerve. He felt as if his body had expanded. For the first time, this weak being felt omnipotent. He had attained power.

At first, he was drunk on the sense of omnipotence. He sank deeper and deeper into the pleasant feeling, searching desperately for more of it, devouring it. In other words, he became a murderer of his own kind. He would surprise them from behind, dragging them one after another into tree hollows. He came to understand with great

clarity that the more he devoured, the more his body was remade from the inside out.

Eventually, he began to think about the most efficient way to devour his brethren. The Dungeon that had spawned him looked silently on as he built a mountain of ash and crouched beside it, wolfing down countless purple crystals. Greedily, persistently, without thought of anything else.

He realized that now he was the one doing the robbing.

It was a very pleasant feeling to so easily destroy his brethren with the fists he swung with all his might. How could he express the ecstasy of skewering a person with a part of his own body?

Again, he became drunk on violence and destruction.

Nothing could stop the power that grew day by day.

Then that moment arrived.

He had mostly lost interest in people in his mad rush to devour his monster brethren, but they had not forgotten about him. The gangs of people that pursued and attacked him were extremely irritating and even stronger than his brethren. There was no harm in avoiding conflict with them. Normally, he tried to hide from them as much as possible, but the people who came on that day were very persistent. As a result, for the first time in quite a while, he gave himself over to instinct and fought back.

After he had massacred every last one, he realized that some of the lumps of flesh that had been people were carrying *those*.

In huge quantities, to boot.

Finally—and this was very unfortunate for the humans—he realized they were just like him.

Just like him, they extracted those things from his brethren and collected them.

That was why the humans had so many of them—so many magic stones.



“The monster is after the magic stones that adventurers collect?!” says Lilly, who had turned pale as she listened to Luvis’s explanation. “I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“But it’s true...When that beast attacked our party, it went straight for the supporters in the rear and snatched their pouches packed with magic stones. It ate them right before our eyes...Even magic didn’t work on it. All we could do was flee...”

That’s when the seed had been implanted in him, Luvis explains.

According to him, his party was made up of four members, all Level 3, and all apparently used to exploring the lower levels. That's how strong the adventurers who got trounced by this monster were.

"The reason we came to the Water Capital in the first place was because we were asked to do a quest...We were supposed to be searching for missing people, or else for their corpses. Aside from us in *Modi Familia*, that dwarf Dormul's familia, *Magni Familia*, received the same request. We were quarreling the whole way..."

"So Dormul is down here, too?"

"Yeah." Luvis nods. Apparently, they went their separate ways after arriving at the lower levels.

"That thing bore down on us. But almost everyone in the party was covered in wounds, and they had to recover somehow. We didn't have a choice..."

"So you took the remaining magic stones and acted as a decoy for the sake of your companions?" Aisha snorts.

"Yes, that's right..." Luvis replies, nodding deeply. Then he readjusts his expression and appeals to us once again.

"That monster is a bad one. It's discovered *efficiency*, and that's probably why it's so much stronger than any of the enhanced species I've met before...even stronger than The Bloodstained Troll."

Ouka and the others change colors as they listen to Luvis's urgent appeal, but Cassandra lifts her face.

"The Bloodstained Troll, I've heard of that..."

"...Yeah, it's the enhanced monster that was wreaking total havoc for the past ten years. By the time the Guild confirmed its existence, scads of upper-class adventurers had already been killed. Even the elite group of second-tier and higher adventurers dispatched to conquer it were instead attacked themselves. I heard that more than fifty people died..." Aisha says.

"F-fifty...A-and what happened in the end?"

"The Guild went crying to *Freya Familia* and they took it down. I heard from them that it was at least the equivalent of a Level Five..."

Haruhime is struck dumb by Aisha's explanation. It's not just her, either. Daphne and Ouka are also gasping at the gruesome tale of the enhanced species.

And Luvis says this mossy giant is even more dangerous than The Bloodstained Troll?

...It does seem possible.

Compared to hunting down its own kind in the vast Dungeon, targeting adventurers who have already collected large quantities of magic stones *would* be far more efficient, with an exponentially larger return. And adventurers who come to the lower levels probably have way more magic stones of way better quality. What's more, other

monsters wouldn't target an enhanced species unless it picked a fight itself.

The worst part of it all is that this enhanced species is in the process of learning the best tricks for attacking adventurers.

The way it retreated after planting the seeds is proof enough.

An enhanced species that excels at hunting adventurers...There's no two ways about it. It's both different and a threat.

"If you do nothing...I think this will turn into an unprecedented catastrophe."

The room falls silent for a few seconds in response to Luvis's broken words. Everyone looks tense.

"Shit. I chose a hell of a time to go on an expedition," Aisha spits out, flicking her long hair violently off her neck. Once all eyes are on her, she continues.

"Putting aside the question of whether it's us who take it down or a group dispatched by the Guild once they catch wind of this, it definitely can't be allowed to run loose."

"That is true, but clearly the more time we give it, the harder it will be to kill. Many adventurers could lose their lives as a result. And most importantly, we cannot abandon Sir Luvis's companions..." Mikoto says with a tense expression on her face.

Ouka and Welf pile on in support of her argument.

"Plus, it'll take a day to get back to the surface. There's no guarantee Chigusa will last that long. Not to mention the fact that we have no idea whether the healers up there will even...be able to get rid of these parasitic plants."

"And as long as we have tons of magic stones, we can be sure it will approach us, right? It's obvious which strategy will take less time."

"But is there any guarantee that we'll be able to remove the parasites once the monster has been killed?" Lilly asks the two young men.

"I think there's a good chance we will," Daphne answers in their place. "If this individual has split off from the moss huge line, then when we kill the main body and destroy all the stones inside, it should turn to ash, right? I think the same thing will happen to these vines."

Lilly looks into Daphne's eyes like she wants to say something in response, but Daphne shrugs and says, "I don't really want to fight it myself. But based on everything I've heard...I don't think it will let us get away."

I'm pretty sure all us upper-class adventurers have that same premonition. Call it a hunch. The moment we turn our backs on that enhanced species, it will bare its teeth.

"...Lilly has said all she has to say. So..."

She looks at me, and so does Aisha.

“You heard what she said, Bell Cranell. What are you gonna do?”

I reflect on all the opinions that the group has expressed, and I make my decision.

“Let’s hunt down that monster.”

“Yeah!” says Welf, pounding his fist onto the palm of his other hand.

“I’m on it,” Ouka adds enthusiastically, swinging his battle-ax onto his shoulder. Lilly and the supporters nod at one another and start preparing to set off right away.

The aim of our Dungeon expedition has taken an unexpected turn. In the face of an irregular situation that no one predicted, our allied party is setting out to conquer an enhanced species.



The first thing he did after learning that people carried large quantities of magic stones was watch them in order to learn.

Early on, he realized that the ones who went along at the back of the group singing songs were a real pain. Those songs were atrocious things that burned his body and often nearly killed him. Therefore, it was necessary to kill the ones in the back first.

Those at the front of the group were very strong and killed heaps of his brethren as he watched with bated breath. Quite often they were outstanding members of the surface dwellers. Still, if they were alone, he could beat them. Therefore, he focused on ways to reduce the size of the groups or prevent them from forming gangs.

He also learned that the stronger ones protected the ones who carried the magic stones. He devised all sorts of weapons to outwit humans and take their crystals. The seeds were one of those weapons.

He laid the groundwork and waited for just the right moment to attack.

Usually the ones who sang songs were females with long ears. If he beat them to death first, the other people became amusingly upset. In that moment, he would hit them, splitting their heads open and throwing the contents around. Trampling on these beings who had caused him so much suffering filled him with a dark excitement and joy.

The females shrieked and cried a lot. For some reason, when he heard them, he felt better. It was as if those cries fulfilled something within him, and so time and again he grabbed their thin, twiglike hands and feet and swung them around and beat them on the ground. He bit them and hit them many times. “Please!” “Stop!” they would

cry. He did not understand their words, but the tone of their singing made him feel good. The flesh of the females whose mouths frothed with blood tasted better to him than the flesh of other people.

Ah, I want to kill.

I want to bite them to death over and over.

Over and over and over.

Even if I fall over the precipice of death and am reborn...

But he had started out weak, and he was careful never to give himself wholly to his instincts. He gave precedence to the intellect that had saved him, and that choice served him well.

He never, ever let humans who tried to escape get away. If they escaped, he was certain they would change, like he had. He knew it intuitively. And he was right. The reason he had descended from his birthplace to the water's edge was partly to find better magic stones and partly to be sure adventurers did not escape. The thundering of the water drowned out their screams. The water was his ally. He learned to use it. If he threw the bitten corpses into the current, no one would discover what he was doing.

In situations where he determined he could not kill all the humans, he planted seeds in them and retreated. These second selves grew into ivy that weakened his targets and alerted him to their location. It was exceedingly easy to devour the weakened humans. The seeds were his most prized creation.

He still had a lot to learn, so he still felt afraid often. He had felt most frightened of all when he saw the girl with the golden hair and golden eyes and her party. Even though they were far away, they terrified him. They would be impossible to defeat. He knew he must not take them on. Before they could draw near, he ran for his life into the depths of the labyrinth. There were other humans like her, too. Beings he knew he should not under any circumstances engage in battle. At the very least, *not yet*, not when he was still weaker than them. That was something else he had learned.

He also noticed that among his brethren was a certain strange subset. These were heretics who had betrayed him and the other brethren. Many times, a powerful hatred and an anger that seemed to burn his body overtook him, and he nearly gave in to his impulses. But the wisdom that whispered in his ear won out each time. He knew he could not beat them, because they formed gangs. He had to gain the strength to take them down single-handedly. He sought greater power so that he could one day bury his fangs in those heretical brethren—especially that siren who looked so soft. To start with, he would go after the females who lived here.

He had learned to hunt at the proper time.

At some point, he had become proud that he was a hunter.

His mace scraped along the ground as he walked down the crystal path.

Illuminated faintly by the light from the white crystals, he stroked his body with his fat, boneless fingers. The cut inflicted by the blade on his torso was already healed.

He thought back to the hunt that had occurred earlier.

Although the opportunity had presented itself by chance as he was chasing the prey that had run off with the magic stones, he hadn't been able to finish them.

In particular, there was that white-haired human who had injured him.

He would be a pain to deal with.

The brown female in the rear also concerned him. He shouldn't underestimate the ones who had withstood the ricocheting seeds, either. He knew full well that a group of talented surface dwellers meant serious trouble.

He decided he would have to trap them.

He stopped and used his mace to demolish the crystal column he had been looking for, then slid into the gap he had created. Beyond it was a small cave.

Several pieces of leftover food that he had caught and hidden in the cave were rolling around at his feet. He'd use those.

"A-ahhh...!"

"Stop...!"

The long-eared people were shivering. Tears pooled in their eyes.

He knew that many humans were unable to abandon their brethren. No matter how severely injured a person was, if he scratched one of their brethren a bit and made it cry, the other human would fly into a rage and bravely face him down. But in the end, that human would itself be attacked.

Perhaps he should torture the females to death. The idea occurred to him, but he decided against it. He had learned that it was folly to lick his chops while the prey was still there. He must not let down his guard until the last human had stopped breathing.

Slowly, he raised the mace that he held in his right hand.

"Stoppppppp..."

"Please, don't..."

He was unmoved by the pleas, the meanings of which he did not understand. Without pausing, he brought down his arm.

"Aaaaaaaahhhh!"

The next instant, unbearably ugly screams rent the air.



We set off, heading first for the area where Luvis separated from his party.

Leaning on Daphne's shoulder for support, the one-armed elven archer looks down through blurred eyes at the map Lilly has unfurled. Struggling through his exhaustion, he points out the direction we should go. Cassandra carries Chigusa on her back.

"I'm...sorry..." Chigusa whispers faintly.

"N-no, it's fine. I may be a healer, but I'm Level Two. I don't care a bit...!" Cassandra says, shaking her head resolutely.

We've decided to avoid evacuating the injured from this floor and dividing our forces. Splitting up in the lower levels would be extremely poor strategy. Instead, we're aiming to kill the enhanced species swiftly, with as much force as we can muster. That's what we decided after listening to the advice from Lilly, Daphne, and Aisha.

"It does worry me that no sightings of the moss huge have been reported yet," Aisha says.

"Most likely it avoids being seen...If it decides it can't kill with certainty, it hides. It's capable of something like that. The thing is cunning," Luvis answers with ragged breath.

"Be on your guard...That monster is *different*," he warns again. Just then—

"...! What's this...?"

I'm leading the party, and I've spotted something in the intersection we've just reached.

A fat red line crosses the floor from the passage on the right-hand side...It looks like it was made by dragging something heavy.

"This red pattern can't be..."

"...Blood?"

Ouka says what Mikoto is unable to.

We hurry on, our mouths clamped shut. We follow the red line as if it is guiding us forward. Our progress is impeded slightly by the occasional monster fight.

Finally, we arrive at the entrance to a "room."

Inside, the stream splits and loops back onto itself like a spider's web tangling with the shore. Clusters of white crystal stud the ground like huge chunks of ice. Perhaps because we're near the Great Falls, the sound of pounding water echoes through the labyrinth even more loudly than before.

Our eyes are drawn to the central part of the room.

"That's...!"

We're looking at the base of one particularly large crystal enshrined in the center of the room. Two elven adventurers are sprawled faceup on the ground. One is male and the other is female. Parasitic vines are growing from their bodies, and their feet are

pulverized as if a blunt weapon has smashed them.

“Oh no...!” Haruhime says, pressing her hand to her mouth. Her reaction is only natural; the sight of those gore-red limbs that bear no resemblance to their original form is truly terrible. I’m sure they can’t walk or move in that state.

And there, next to them, on a crystal pedestal...

“...”

“The enhanced species...!”

Just like Welf says, the moss huge is sitting right there, silently, with its chin tucked in. It’s paying no attention whatsoever to the people sprawled before it. It seems to simply be waiting for something.

“Shario, Lana...!”

“...So those are your companions?” Aisha asks.

“Yes. But one is missing...! Alec...!” Luvis answers. His face had turned white from weakness, but now it flushes red with anger, and his eyebrows draw together in distress. His eyes grow misty.

At his words, my own heart sends up a painful cry. Just like with Wiene, we weren’t able to save them...Maybe it’s arrogant to have such a thought. But I can’t stop this inexplicable emotion raging in my soul.

I squeeze my hands into fists. As I do, monsters begin to appear from multiple places in the intricate tangle of streams inside the room, exactly as if the smell of blood on the ground has drawn them here.

Blue crabs and other monsters begin moving toward the central strip of shore where the enhanced species and the elves are.

“Ahhhh...!”

The female elf, who is already on the verge of death, lets out a hoarse scream. With tears in her eyes, she wriggles helplessly on the ground.

“Oh man...Don’t tell me they’re bait!”

“You’re saying he used helpless adventurers as a decoy to draw us in here?!”

Welf’s and Ouka’s guesses must be right. There’s no other explanation.

That enhanced species intends to hold the adventurers hostage in order to draw us into this room.

I can’t believe it. To think that a monster would set a trap like this.

That monster is different.

Luvis’s words flicker in my mind.

I’m hiding in the shadow of a crystal column at the entrance to the room as I peer inside. Like Welf and the others, my face betrays a horrified expression.

“...Hey, shrimp, are you sure the punch line’s not gonna be that the enhanced species is actually a Xenos? I’ve never heard of a monster this sly,” Aisha whispers.

“I-I don’t know! The Xenos never mentioned anything like this, let alone Fels...!” Lilly says, clearly upset. The Amazon shrew scrunches her face into an almost saucy frown.

“And after he reels us in, is he intending to shoot us with those seeds or something while we’re fighting the other monsters...? Eternal † Shadow, can you give us an estimate of how many there are?”

“No, it’s impossible. There are too many to count in this room...! And a lot are still hiding underwater...!”

Mikoto scowls in frustration as she scans the terrain with Yatano Black Crow.

That enhanced species probably chose this location for its trap knowing full well the advantages...

It still hasn’t made a move, maybe because it hasn’t noticed us yet.

“Miss Aisha...!”

I lean into the room, unable to hold myself back as the monsters draw nearer to the fallen adventurers second by second. Aisha nods in disgust, maybe because she can’t stand the fact that things are proceeding exactly as the monster has planned.

“I know. The simplest approach would really be to use magic from our position over here, but those elves would get caught up in it, too.”

Leaving Luvis’s companions to die is not an option. Not even if that means playing into the monster’s trap.

“Bell and I will take on the enhanced species. Eternal † Shadow, you, Ouka, and Welf handle the other monsters. Once we get that huge thing away from the elves, carry them out of here.”

“Got it.” Mikoto nods.

“Haruhime, you guys move to an open area away from walls. Not here by the entrance. If monsters are spawned all of a sudden, things will get ugly fast.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Haruhime answers.

Aisha, Mikoto, Ouka, Welf, and I will rescue the elves. Lilly, Haruhime, Cassandra, and the injured Chigusa and Luvis will stay on the sidelines, with Daphne to guard them.

“—Let’s go!”

We have no time to spare. To save our elven comrades, we leap into the room all at once with lightning speed, heading from the entrance on the southeast side of the room toward the central area. Lilly and the others who cannot fight go to the room’s southernmost edge, which Mikoto has determined is safest. The monsters are gathering around the enhanced species. There is no sign of an

opponent on the southern banks.

Aisha leads us as we leap across the streams, speeding up as we go. The monsters notice us and try to attack, but we either pull away or throw them off, refusing to fight. We are rapidly approaching the center.

But...why is the moss huge still not moving?

I furrow my brows. The other monsters have noticed our rapid advance, so there's no way the enhanced species hasn't noticed, too. Nevertheless, it sits on the pedestal not moving a finger.

What's going on? Is it preparing an attack? Or does it have some other aim?

Once Mikoto has encountered a particular monster, it can never escape from the sphere of her perception. So unless she says otherwise, that has to be the monster we fought a little while ago. I glance at her. She's staring intently at the stock-still enhanced species as if it's some kind of puzzle. Welf, Ouka, and Aisha can't hide their bewildered expressions, either.

We all sense something ominous, but our only choice is to keep approaching.

"...No, n..."

The fragment of a word reaches us from the male elf lying on the ground, but his voice is nearly drowned out by the sound of the flowing water. His lips move in spasms as he desperately tries to tell us something.

"...It's not the monster...Don't come over here...!"

The moment I make out what he is saying, I hear the soft sound of something falling.

A piece of moss has *peeled away from the monster's eye and fallen to the ground.*

"..."

From beneath the fallen moss, human skin appears.

Then a human eye, so exhausted it is unable to focus.

It's another elf, like the ones on the floor.

Luvi's third companion.

Icy fingers grip my heart. I hear Mikoto's breath stop short.

—I've heard about this.

While Mikoto's Yatano Black Crow allows her to identify enemies, she cannot distinguish between individuals. It's as if a piece of black paper unfurls in her mind and red dots appear on it, but those points representing monsters don't vary in size or color.

Her skill did function properly. But it reacted to an outer shell.

The monster has covered an adventurer in masses of moss taken from its own body. We've been tricked by a simulation.

I've never heard of a moss huge using moss in this way.

“...?!”

A second later, Mikoto whips her face toward the south as if she’s been punched.

She’s noticed something—an *enemy approaching Lilly and the other supporters with an intense energy*, way beyond that of the monsters gathered in the center of the room. Her face goes white.

“Please run, Lady Lilly!!”

As I follow her gaze, I see it, too. A green form slowly emerging from the stream behind the spot where Lilly and the others stand looking surprised by Mikoto’s sudden scream.

The monster’s dripping-wet right arm grips a crystal mace as it stares at their backs with a blank expression.

“—!!”

And then.

Before I can even take in the scene before my eyes or hear Mikoto’s cry split the air, I freeze and stop running forward. I spin around, my feet scraping over the crystal floor as I am overcome by a horrid sense of inertia, and I peel away from the astonished Aisha, Ouka, and Welf.

I accelerate with all my might as I run toward the south side of the room.

“!!”

The monster raises its mace.

My left foot leaps across the stream to the next strip of land.

Finally, Daphne notices the form that has crept up on them without the slightest sound.

I kick off with my right foot, shattering the cluster of crystals I was just standing on.

I’m moving too slowly. I won’t make it in time. That’s what Daphne thinks, and her face freezes.

I breathe in, my lips trembling.

Lilly and the others freeze, too, as they glance back and see the monster about to inflict its deadly punishment.

I raise my left foot to take another step.

Ring, ring.

The soft sound of a bell comes from it, and it glows with white light.

I’ve charged for two seconds.

The ground explodes under my lowered foot. I have become a missile.

Whoosh!!

The force of my kick against the ground becomes a propellant sending me toward the ceiling. In an instant, this insane speed I’ve dared to unleash closes the gap between the threatened group and me.

I draw the Divine Knife.

“Aaaaaaaargh!!”

I bellow out a war cry from the pit of my stomach and slash at the monster with a lightning-swift movement.

The flash of the black blade cuts through the blunt crystal weapon as it swings down toward Lilly and the others.



He stared in disbelief.

The trap composed of the bait and the replica of himself seemed to have worked.

He seemed to have snuck up successfully behind the female humans.

But then the boy with the white hair had rushed over with ridiculous speed and gotten in his way.

His favorite crystal weapon had been broken in half and sent flying toward the ceiling.

He was irritated. His carefully laid hunting plan had been destroyed, and his chance to eat magic stones had been stolen from him.

He listened to his anger and decided his first move would be to kill the boy who was skidding onto the ground.

“...”

But then the boy looked up, and he saw his eyes, and his instinct told him something.

This human is dangerous.

The glinting rubellite gaze that shot through him was unflappable, cold, and infused with a single-minded will to fight.

It had been a long time since he looked into a pair of eyes and shivered with that sensation akin to terror.

The light glowing in those red eyes was the flame of outrage. The human was incensed that his fellow humans had been injured and placed in danger.

“—Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

The boy charged forward gripping two knives.

Fast. Fast. Fast.

One after the next, the black and white blades flew at him, trying to gouge into his body.

But—he was still just the slightest bit stronger than the human.

“?!”

He ignored the blades digging into him and swung his fist down.

Instantly the boy dodged, tumbling onto the floor. The gouge where the moss had flown off his body quickly filled back in.

His body was convenient. It regenerated itself. The more magic stones he devoured, the more his cells multiplied.

When the human stood up, he had an astonished expression on his face. Right away the boy charged again with a speed and force that was less like a rabbit than a wild horse. At least, that was how it looked to him, and he had hunted countless humans.

This opponent was not hurried, just fast. But that did not undermine his composure. He could handle an endless number of those sharp, insignificant cuts.

“Mr. Bell?!”

The small female looked at the boy's distorted face and screamed. The scent of magic stones was coming from her. After he crushed the boy, he would destroy that female next.

“Yaah!”

The boy, who had been forced to step back before the swinging arms, thrust out his left hand.

He knew all about that trick the humans used. It was called “magic.”

He couldn't even count the number of times he and his brethren had nearly been obliterated by it back when he was still weak. It was the human weapon he had to be most wary of. But he also knew that in order to use the magic, they had to sing. They needed time. And no matter how short the song was, his attack would be faster.

Idiot. He sneered.

But at the very moment when he planned to leap toward the boy and crush him—something unexpected happened.

“Firebolt!”

It took only an instant.

An instant for the flaming light to be released.

Frozen in the face of this magic he'd never before experienced, he took a direct hit.

A scream burst from his throat.



"EE?!"

The monster's scream rips through the air.

After my Swift-Strike Magic beats out the mossy giant's approach and hits the center of its body, it swings both arms around wildly in pain.

It was trying to crush me before I had the chance to say a chant...!

I can tell as much from its behavior. That's the scary reality. A monster that's not a Xenos has figured out the structure the magic adventurers use and is attempting to counteract it.

This is indeed an Irregular born of the Dungeon, and an extremely unusual and dangerous one at that.

We absolutely have to kill it here and now.

As I make up my mind, I fly toward it.

"Yaah!"

"OOO...?!"

I use the black knife in my right hand to shave off a piece of my enemy's shoulder, and then with the glittering white blade in my left hand I slice into its torso. The moss huge writhes its blazing body in anguish, trying to escape the violent storm of flames and cutting blades that descend one after another.

Just beyond the spot where it stands recklessly throwing its body in every direction is a strong, fast-flowing current.

—Oh no you don't!

I raise my eyebrows and stamp on the ground as the monster attempts to dive into the stream and retreat once again. Lurching forward, I try to inflict a fatal blow.

"—"

That's when it happens.

The monster, who up till this point has simply been running this way and that in a tormented attempt to escape, gets a murderous gleam in its yellow eyes that makes me suspicious. Suddenly those eyes look as sharp as a hawk's.

Even in the throes of a difficult situation, my enemy has recognized the impatience in its opponent's heart.

As my body flows forward, *wooden whips* shoot up around my feet.

"Huh?!"

Tree roots are winding around my boots and tightening around my knees. The roots grow from the moss huge's calves—which are in my blind spot—and into the ground. They're an indirect weapon generated by the expanding and contracting wooden frame covering the monster's entire body.

I've been taken in—no, *I've been outwitted*.

This intelligent enhanced species has played its hidden card, and I have to admit it's beaten me in this round of bets.

"OOOOOOO!"

It lets out a howl filled with pain and anger, and then throws itself backward, dragging me toward the water along with it.

"Mr. Bell?!"

As Lilly's scream echoes through the room, the tree roots break

through the crystal ground and become visible.

I'm hanging in the air with my feet bound and no way to resist. The roots pull taut and drag me closer and closer to the water until I hit the gurgling stream.

"Glug—?!"

I'm overwhelmed by shock and flying droplets, and then the sensation of being swallowed up entirely by the water.

The world turns blue. Sounds become distant, as if a membrane has been stretched over my ears. I am immersed in this cold watery world that cuts off all communication with the land. The sensation of floating lasts only a few seconds, and then my body is swept along at least five meters below the water's surface.

It got me. That single phrase blinks across my drowning brain.

An instant later, the horrifying figure linked to me by threads of wood rushes at me with fists raised.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

Its howl sends hundreds of bubbles floating toward me along with the vibrations from the sound. The mossy huge's enormous fist slams into my windpipe.

"Oof!"

The air in my lungs rushes out in a huge bubble. My body shoots across the streambed like an arrow, totally ignoring any such thing as water pressure. The enhanced species follows on my heels with equal speed.

As my back slams into an underwater crystal wall, the monster punches my cheekbone.

"—?!"

The current carries me along in the direction I went flying. But my enemy is not about to let me go. The roots tying our feet together have become shackles shaving away at my life. The monster rushes toward me with eyes bulging, like some wrathful wave.

I force myself to recover from the last attack and finally think to use the knives still held in both hands to defend myself. But even though I try to time the movement of the Divine Knife with my enemy's approach, I'm too late. I'm moving too slowly. As the knife swims in front of me horizontally, the monster's fist buries itself deep in my stomach. Once again bubbles spew from my mouth.

My sense of movement and timing on land is way off down here.

With my hands and feet bound by the water, I'm now in a defensive position with the monster on offense. Although the blue clothes I have on throw off a faint light, my body doesn't move how I want it to. So this is how things are, even with the benefit of the Undine cloth. From the monster's perspective, I must be little different from a drowning child. This environment requires completely different

movements from land, but I can't adapt. I'm just tossing about uselessly. The shape of the stream around me has changed, and I sense that I've been swept out of the room into the main current.

This blue flowing world is both beautiful and cruel.

There's the terror of not being able to breathe and the certainty that the moment I lose my composure, I'll be pulled closer to death. As I'm thrown forward by the monster's blow, I look down at the streambed and see the corpse of an adventurer. His arms seem to be beckoning me to join him.

My body flips over, my feet and head switching places again and again. My equilibrium is gone. Already I have no idea which way is the streambed and which is the surface. So this is how unstable a human becomes when his feet can no longer touch the ground. This is all it takes to throw us off balance.

Confronted with an overwhelming disadvantage in terrain, my supposed Level-4 status is completely useless.

The full terror of this waterside Dungeon, and the essence of what the Water Capital really is, finally dawns on me.

This is—an underwater battle!!

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh?!”

Even though the moss huge isn't a water-dwelling monster, it moves quite a bit better down here than I do. It uses its wooden frame to send out feelers. The shape seems to be designed to reduce the resistance of the water, and sometimes it pushes the frame against the wall or wraps it around a crystal to gain speed or change direction. My opponent has been in the Water Capital longer than I have, and therefore it knows how to handle the terrain better.

All my counterattacks meet empty space. Still, I'm somehow able to fend off the attacks that come from 360 degrees by using my gauntlets and armor. If it weren't for the Undine cloth, I'd probably be dead by now. Thanks to leveling up, my lung capacity is greater than that of ordinary people and I still have some leeway, but I'm not sure how long I can last. I try again and again to reach the shore, but the cords binding my feet won't let me get there.

Blood is seeping from where my mouth was punched and where the sharp roots poked in between the gaps in my armor. As the blood drifts away, it clouds the clear blue water and turns it a dingy red. As if drawn by this stream of blood, a large form twists into sight in the distance.

It's an—aqua serpent?!

The large-category monster has entered this stream from a tributary. The harsh underwater glitter of its eyes is both magnificent and terrifying.

“JAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

This one is a genuine water-dwelling monster, and it swims toward me even faster than the moss huge. I have no time to defend myself as its fangs sink into my shoulder.

“Ah!!”

I feel a burning pain as yet more blood swirls into the water. I’m starting to think my life is at risk as the jaws seek my bones—when the punishing roots wrapped around my feet suddenly disappear.

Huh?

The moss huge has removed the roots from its body. It stares at me for a moment, then puts out its wooden feelers, turns against the current, and disappears into another tributary.

It released my restraints? Just when it had the perfect opportunity to kill its prey?

Was it afraid of the aqua serpent? That answer makes me suspicious, but I have no time to think. I plunge the knife in my right hand into the monster that’s locked onto my shoulder.

“—!!”

As the huge form writhes in pain, shaking me around as it does, I try to pull its fangs from my flesh.

Just then, I become belatedly aware of a powerful roar vibrating through the water.

—

I look over my shoulder toward the source of the vibrations.

In the distance, I can see a break in the water.

The break seems to be where the stream reaches its end point and *falls downward*—.

—No...way.

All the streams on this floor lead to the Great Falls—.

Eina taught me that. I said those very words myself not long ago.

Swept along by the current, my body is heading toward the center of the twenty-fifth floor, straight for the enormous waterfall.

Oh crap!!

As it approaches the falls, the stream becomes a veritable torrent. The water is moving too fast. It just keeps accelerating. The mouth of the waterfall is sucking in everything around it and smashing everything to smithereens at its base.

The blood drains from my face as I concentrate all my strength on getting this aqua serpent off me. I recklessly plunge the black knife into its neck, its face, its eyeballs. The monster spews blood and shrieks as it furiously thrashes its long body around. Suddenly I’m thrust above the water’s surface.

“Peh!!”

I stick my face out of the water. But the air I had been longing for

so desperately is tasteless. Burning with impatience, I beat Hakugen against the serpent's cranium. Finally, the strength drains from its jaw and it releases me.

It's too late.

I'm already at the end point. The waterfall is sucking me unhesitatingly toward the precipice.

I reach out my hand but find nothing but air. The next instant, a terrifying floating sensation overwhelms my body.

One more second and I'll be dragged over the edge along with the wat—

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!

An explosion of water is pouring down. Huge drops beat onto my skin. My screams lost in the roar of the falling water, I am swept downward in the biggest waterfall in the Dungeon, the Great Falls.

CHAPTER 5 BRIDE OF THE WATER CAPITAL

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CHAPTER 5

BRIDE OF THE WATER CAPITAL

“Mr. Bell, Mr. Bell?!”

Lilly’s cries were swept away by the flowing water.

She was surrounded by the spider’s web of streams in the room full of crystal clusters. Facing the place where Bell had disappeared into the water, she called his name again and again.

“Master Bell has been pulled under by the monster...” Haruhime said, standing in a daze beside Lilly.

“We have to save him right away! The water is flowing so quickly, he’ll be carried out of the room before we know it!”

Lilly threw off the Goliath Robe and backpack as she spoke, exposing her thin body dressed in shorts and a small coat of Undine cloth. She was about to dive into the water after him.

“It’s useless, Lilliluka!” Daphne shouted. Laying Luvis, whom she had been supporting, on the ground, she grabbed Lilly’s wrist and pulled her back.

An instant later, the fangs of a raider fish skimmed past the tip of Lilly’s nose. Lilly stood dazed as blood trickled down her cheek where the fang had grazed it.

“What the hell are you doing? If you or I jump into that stream, a monster will kill us! Did you forget how dangerous that water is?!”

“B-but...but Mr. Bell!!”

Lilly was more upset than she had ever been before. Daphne was staring at Lilly, her mouth shut tight, when Aisha, Welf, and Ouka returned with the three elven adventurers. Although the blue crabs had slowed them in helping Bell, they had succeeded in slaughtering all the monsters on land.

“Miss Aisha! Mr. Bell has—!”

“I know; I saw.”

Aisha handed the injured elves over to the flustered Cassandra, then glanced toward Mikoto. In addition to Yatano Black Crow that allowed her to perceive enemies, the girl had a similar skill called Yatano White Crow that let her see allies with the same Falna as her. She shook her head, a pained expression on her face.

“Sir Bell’s signal has left the room...”

“That...”

The remaining color drained from Lilly’s face as she realized that Bell had been swept away along with the enhanced species. Welf and Ouka, who were out of breath, stared in the same direction as her. Aisha sighed.

“Okay, you guys. We’re not going to save Bell Cranell.”

“Wha—?!”

“We’ll never catch up if we chase after him, since he’s been swept up by such a fast current. Plus, how quickly can we move if we’re carrying these injured elves?”

“M-Miss Aisha! Wait a second!”

“Relax, shrimp. What are we gonna do if our party’s brain—you—falls apart?”

Lilly had been about to lash out at Aisha, but a long, thin finger poked her in the forehead. She bent backward as tears pooled in her eyes, staring in confusion at Aisha.

“Bell Cranell can handle this floor on his own.”

“...!”

“That kid’s status is weird. He’s already above average for a Level Four, and in terms of speed and agility, he’s practically at the very top. I don’t know how much potential he had already saved up, of course.”

In other words, Bell was way above the minimum level required for the twenty-fifth floor. Aisha snorted before continuing in a disgruntled tone.

“Bell Cranell is stronger than I am. Not that I want to put that to the test.”

“Miss Aisha...”

“Even if he’s drawn into an underwater battle, I’m sure he’ll stubbornly find some way to survive. Just pray for him to get back onto the shore through his own strength. There’s no way he’ll die on land.”

Hearing this vote of confidence from the second-tier adventurer, Lilly let her frenzied emotions finally settle down. Aisha looked at her face, which was starting to take on its typical expression as the analyst of the party, and finished her argument.

“If you’re gonna worry about anyone, it should be us. Am I wrong?”

Lilly waited for a moment, then slowly nodded. The prum squeezed her childlike hands into fists.

“...Miss Aisha is right. Let’s stop thinking about Bell.”

“Lady Lilly!”

“Hey now, Li’l E!”

“Just calm down,” she said, taking a deep breath as if she was

talking more to herself than to Haruhime and Welf.

“We have to put the safety of the party first. If we don’t save ourselves, we’ll only be more of a burden on him.”

“Li’l E, you—”

“Bell will be okay. Let’s have faith in him.”

It was clear that she, together with the renart, cared more for the boy than anyone else in the party. But she did not put those feelings into words. Instead, she pushed her personal emotions aside and donned the mask of a commander.

“The situation has changed. Lilly proposes that we escape from this floor.”

“...!”

Not only Welf but Aisha, too, looked surprised at Lilly’s sudden leap to a decision.

“Now that Mr. Bell is gone, it will be hard to fend off attacks from ordinary monsters while protecting the injured at the same time. The burden on Miss Aisha will be too heavy.”

Now there were five wounded. If each was carried by one member of the party, that left only three members who could fight properly. As Lilly laid out her logical argument, she glanced at the elven adventurers whom Cassandra was already tending to.

“But Lady Lilly, wouldn’t it be wrong to abandon Sir Bell on this floor and escape...?” Mikoto asked.

“I’m not saying escape to the surface, just to the cliff by the passage leading to the twenty-fourth floor.”

“What do you mean?” Ouka pressed. Lilly responded in an even voice.

“Back in that spot with the good views, there aren’t any streams, and aside from the flying monsters, we won’t be attacked. The cliff trail is the only one, so it will be easy to protect ourselves...That enhanced species won’t be able to take us by surprise. I say we set up an emergency camp out there.”

As long as they kept an eye out for monsters descending from the twenty-fourth floor, they should be okay.

“Miss Aisha, you go up to Rivira by yourself and get help. Lilly and the others will...get a level boost from Miss Haruhime and defend the exit of the connecting passage. We will protect the injured,” she continued, lowering her voice after a pause so Luvis and the other elves wouldn’t hear her talking about Haruhime’s ability.

“So you’re suggesting we use that cliff as an improvised fort,” Welf said.

“It’s true that carrying this many wounded up to the eighteenth floor will be difficult,” Daphne added. “If we just have to get to the entrance to the twenty-fifth floor, though, I think we can make it, and

given the terrain, we may be able to hold out until help comes. If we can do that, a party descending from the middle levels just might help us.”

Both she and Welf looked satisfied by Lilly’s explanation. The prum continued.

“Plus, now that Mr. Bell has been separated from Lilly, he is likely to end up coming out at that big cavern. That’s what happens when you get separated in the Water Capital, right...isn’t that what Miss Eina said? If we’re camped out on the cliff by the connecting passageway, we should be able to spot him.”

Having finished her explanation, Lilly drew a breath. Ouka alone still looked skeptical.

“...I understand making the cliff our base. But what are we gonna do if that enhanced species attacks us? It might not be able to surprise us, but with Antianeira gone, we’ll have a helluva time fighting it off.”

“That’s precisely my plan. The road out there doesn’t branch off at any point and has nowhere to escape. By luring it there...Mikoto can use her Futsu no Mitama gravity-controlling magic to crumble the entire cliff path and send it crashing way down to the ground below where it’ll be buried by the rubble,” Lilly said, a cold expression on her face.

Ouka was at a loss for words. He coughed loudly.

Daphne, too, gaped at Lilly. In this do-or-die situation, the prum had found a way to pay the monster back for its earlier clever use of the terrain.

I may have taught her how to lead...but this girl is way smarter than me!

Daphne, who had instructed the prum girl step-by-step, was in awe. Once, she had witnessed a full-scale battle by *Loki Familia*. Finn’s cool and controlled face as he directed his troops against Goliath, the floor boss of the seventeenth floor, rose before her mind’s eye, and she couldn’t help layering it on top of the face of the supporter who stood before her now, supposedly weaker than Daphne herself.

“The question is whether Chigusa and the other wounded can hold out that long,” Lilly continued. “And of course, this all assumes that if the enhanced species attacks us on the way through the labyrinth, we’ll be able to fight it off...So, what do you think?”

She looked up at Aisha. Only at the end of the explanation had she allowed some of her uncertainty to show.

The battle-hardened Amazon grinned.

“I like it. Let’s go with that plan.”

Her words were the signal for the group to start moving, and Welf and the others quickly responded. Lilly put back on the pack and Goliath Robe she’d thrown off and set to work on other preparations.

“I knew we’d be able to rely on you, Lady Lilly. Mr. Bell said so, too,” said Haruhime, who was helping her.

“Huh?”

“He said he always relied on Miss Lilly...He told me that when I was cleaning the house once.”

Lilly widened her eyes and flushed to hear this new information.

“Compared to you, I’m always getting flustered and not helping anyone...” Haruhime sighed.

“Wh-what are you talking about?! Your strength is exactly what we need in emergencies!”

As if to hide her embarrassment, she gave the dejected renart’s tail a sharp slap.

“Ouch!” the fox girl yelped.

“Stop playing around and hurry up!” Aisha scolded.

Just before Lilly followed Welf and the others out of the room, she glanced back.

“...”

Maybe Bell had already defeated the enhanced species and was trying at this very moment to meet back up with them...No, she had to get that wishful thinking out of her head. As long as the parasitic vines growing from Chigusa and the others hadn’t vanished, the monster was alive. For the sake of her companions, Lilly had to leave.

“Mr. Bell...I’m sorry.”

With no one looking, the prum turned toward the water that had swept Bell away and allowed the face of a weak young girl to reveal itself for an instant. Then, mopping the corners of her eyes, she turned and left the room.



The sound of the waterfall thunders on endlessly.

I can tell because of the vibrations that reach me. Although the bottom of the pool is cold and dark, my entire body is hot like I’m on fire. I make a burbling sound as I sink. When I stop moving, I shake off the hand of the cold water that is trying to drag me over the edge of death and push myself upward with a single thrust.

A fountain of bubbles shatters the water’s light-speckled surface.

“Cough! Gasp!”

As my face breaks through the water, I am racked by coughs. My throat convulses as I spit up the huge volume of water I swallowed. The constant powerful roaring and showers of water are incredibly irritating. But that very irritation is proof that I, Bell Cranell, am alive.

I’m in the center of the huge pool at the base of the Great Falls,

and I just narrowly escaped death.

“Aaah, ooooh, errrgh...!!”

An idiotic, agonized groan escapes the gap between my teeth. I obey the pulsating voice of my instincts and flail my arms like a drowning child, heading for the shore of the pool as I splash the water around noisily. The second my struggling feet touch ground, I kick off forcefully and push the upper half of my body out of the water. I walk forward, almost tripping facedown into the water, until I reach the shallows where it's around my shins.

“Aaaaaahhh...!”

I fall forward onto my arms and start crawling. My whole body hurts so much I feel like my blood vessels have exploded. The world looks red. I don't even want to imagine what condition I'm in. I've probably fractured multiple bones. To escape this intense pain that's making every nerve in my body scream out, I reach for the high potion I stuffed into my reinforced leg holsters and use it. I do that again and again, with who knows how many vials.

After I've poured solutions over my head and drunk them down until all my potions are gone...I finally raise my head and look up at the Great Falls.

...So that's where I fell from.

The immense waterfall pours its emerald-blue water straight down. When we first arrived at this floor, the magnificent flow of water appeared so beautiful to me I couldn't take my eyes off it, but now that it's less than fifty meders away, it looks like some horrendous monster. More than anything, the immensity of it is frightening. I can't help shivering at the sensation that nature is an enemy staring down on my insignificant self.

I think I fell from somewhere near the middle of the falls. Given that I was carried over the edge by a stream running through the multilayered labyrinth inside the cliff, that would make sense. If I'd fallen from the very top of the falls up by the roof of this floor...even my Level-4 body would probably have been smashed to pieces.

A shiver runs down my neck as I stand up and look around.

The plunge pool is as big as a lake. It fills about half the huge cavern, and the deep-blue color of the area directly under the falls hints at its depth. Water droplets dance ceaselessly at the base, sending up a white mist. The roar of the falls is so powerful I'm worried my eardrums will burst. About a hundred meders south of the plunge pool is the top of another waterfall leading to the twenty-sixth floor. If I was to fall over that one, there's no way I'd survive again.

When I turn my back on the plunge pool—or rather, lake—I'm confronted by a magical landscape. There are crystal shores that look like rocky flats, and crystal valleys, and crystal cliffs. All are made

from the same blue crystal. The only plant in sight is an ajura shedding its bluish white petals. As I stare at the tree, which I've seen once before in the red-light district, I forget the passage of time.

...Get ahold of yourself! This is no time to daydream. You have to meet up with the others!

I clear my head and check my gear. The Divine Knife and Hakugen are safe in the scabbards where I hurriedly thrust them. Aside from a few antidotes, my items are gone. But my armor just has a few scratches on it, and I've got plenty of mental energy left.

Right now, I'm on the eastern side of the cavern. If I head southeast along the shore, I'll reach the connecting passageway to the twenty-sixth floor, and if I go the opposite direction along the northeast side that I'm facing now, I'll reach a cave leading to the labyrinth inside the cliff.

The enhanced species disappeared down a tributary.

It probably assumes I drowned in the Great Falls and is going after Lilly and the rest of the party. I have to hurry.

I hope they're okay...

The shallows where I'm standing now have so many crystal clusters jutting from them they look like reefs. Far above my head I see some dots, probably harpies and sirens. They don't seem to have noticed me yet. In order to avoid unnecessary fights, I turn toward the cave to the northeast, beyond the ajura. Just then, I hear something.

“__”

It's a whizzing sound, like something cutting through the wind.

I jump reflexively to the side. You could say it's my adventurer's intuition that tells me to move away in time.

The next instant, something rips my shoulder and I fall into the shallow water.

“Huh...?!”

The water assaults my face as blood flowing from my shoulder dirties the emerald-blue surface. I look up toward the Great Falls towering behind me. Countless scarlet lines are slanting through the misty air.

“Crap...iguaçu...!” I mutter, irritated.

The swallow monsters appear in the Water Capital that extends from the twenty-fifth to the twenty-seventh floor. They live in the cliff behind the Great Falls, and adventurers call them “invisible monsters.”

The reason for their nickname is the incredible speed they possess.

Whenever someone shows up near the falls, they zoom out fast enough to break through that violent cascade of water and bombard them. They look exactly like bullets fired into the air. Some adventurers have even conferred the name “Flash” on them. They're the most feared monsters on this floor—and the fastest ones in the

lower levels!

“—!!”

“Eh?!”

I don't even have time to curse my own carelessness for standing around near the plunge pool before another scarlet flash streaks toward me. Even with my enhanced dynamic visual acuity from leveling up, I can't fully make it out. It tears into my cheek, and the wind pressure around it knocks me off balance.

Then another one shoots down.

This one heads for the center of my torso, but even as I stand there wide-eyed, I thrust up one arm to block the devilish missile from the back of my hand, which is sheathed in its dir-adamantite guard.

“Oof!”

There's a tremendous dull *thud* and a shock like I've been hit with a huge hammer. I fall back clumsily onto my butt in the shallow water.

When I look at the hand that blocked the attack...I see that the corpse of a swallow is smeared onto it. The wet scarlet feathers are falling off, and its magic stone is visible beneath the pink flesh. My eyes meet a bloody eyeball that's popped out of its socket, and I wince.

This is the fate of an iguaçu that fails in its attack.

The instant they collide with a shield or another hard object, their own speed becomes their curse and crushes their body to death.

The sight of this vain and weird manner of dying creeps me out. As I'm thinking about it, I hear that sound again. *Whiz, whiz.*

A frightening chorus of bodies cutting through the wind.

“...Crap.”

I look up, and a hope-shattering scene meets my eyes.

An unbelievable number of those scarlet lines are slanting through the air.

I'm not talking about one or two. Even just counting the trajectories I'm able to see at one glance, there are at least twenty of them. Yes indeed, a countless number of iguaçu are flying around up there.

Could this be an irregular event in the Dungeon—a mass outbreak of monsters? And just my luck, an outbreak of iguaçu?

A chill runs down my spine. I stare as one of the scarlet lines flashes toward me, and I leap away to avoid it.

“Whoa!”

“—!!”

The iguaçu have begun their bombardment.

Dozens of attacks rain down around me. The monsters streak past at top speed half a step in front of me, grazing my arms and legs

before exploding into the water's surface like miniature geysers.

It's no use—all I can see are lines!

I run through the shallow water and dive with all my strength behind a crystal cluster protruding from its surface.

"...?!"

Bambambambambam!!

Right away, I hear the sound of crystal busting apart. I stand there gaping at the tsunami of crystal fragments flying into the air and the powerful vibrations, which I can feel because my back is pressed against the cluster.

It's unbelievable—this thick, rock-hard crystal cluster is being chipped away before my eyes!

Some of the monstrous swallows die as they crash into the surface, but still they're trying to demolish the obstacle that stands between them and their prey. As they inflict this rain of rapid-fire projectiles on me, the sound of their bodies cutting through the air drowns out their menacing cries.

Second by second, the cluster nears total destruction. My heart pounds low and distant.

A drop of sweat falls from my forehead.

They're betting their lives on inflicting a single deadly blow. That's got to be powerful. All the upper-class adventurers say that if you encounter an iguaçu, you should drop anything you're holding and run. It's reasonable to think they could open a hole straight through you with their bodies. My enemies are pure hunters willing to offer up their own fleeting lives to murder the invader.

I guess this is part two of my baptism in the lower levels, right after the underwater battle.

The Dungeon has no mercy for adventurers who lose their footing.

What do I do what do I do what do I do?

The crystal cluster where I'm taking shelter is too far from the cave leading inside the cliff. If I try to escape that way, I'll be stung by the equivalent of a hornet's nest along the way. If I swim toward the plunge pool and hide underwater, water-dwelling monsters will kill me. Retreat is impossible. All I can do is ride out this assault using some kind of big, hard protective gear. But I don't have a shield or heavy armor. I might as well be naked. There's no way I can withstand the attack. I'm defenseless.

—I hate this. I won't accept it. I can't go out like this.

I will not die here. This fate of utter destruction can eat a pile of crap. Damn, I'm developing a dirty mouth. Whatever, who cares. Not me. Not if I can get out of here alive.

My friends are out there. My promise to help the Xenos is out there.

The rival I want to beat and the idol I want to match are out there.

I haven't done anything yet!

A second after that thought passes through my head, the last of the crystal posts in the cluster crashes into the water.

"...!"

I dive underwater to evade the charging iguaçu.

Amid the splashes, I roll over and quickly stand up again.

Half the flock of iguaçu has been killed, and the rest are whizzing through the air as they rally their forces again. As I survey the countless slanting scarlet lines...I make up my mind.

I reach my right hand toward my hip and draw a knife. Holding it backhand as I crouch slightly, I prepare myself to face the flock of monsters.

—I'm going to cut them all down.

Since I can't escape and I can't defend myself, I've decided to intercept them head-on. My senior adventurers just might faint if they could see me now.

It's not that I've gone crazy or gotten desperate.

I just had a thought.

If she was here—if the Sword Princess Aiz Wallenstein was here—this is probably what she would do.

And if she could get through it...then I'll prove I can, too.

"—Game on!"

I've chosen Hakugen as my weapon. Even among daggers, this unicorn-horn knife is incomparably light, and it handles incredibly. It's the right knife to take down those ultra-speedy monsters.

I don't need any other weapons. I'm going to focus all my energy into the single blade in my right hand. If I wait till I see them, I'll be too late. I have to feel—the flow of the wind and their drive to kill. I have to predict their trajectories.

"..."

White spray flies from the waterfall as the sound of the pounding water tangles with the whizzing of monsters cutting through air.

After a moment, color drains from the world and everything becomes quiet. Even my own heartbeat and the ripples at my feet disappear. This mentality of extreme concentration is leading me somewhere.

My lips suck in a small breath and exhale it.

The next instant.

All at once, the scarlet lines up above turn toward me.

"—Yarr!"

I focus all my energy into a single thrust, and then slash the glittering white blade at the speeding bullet that's leading the flock toward me.

It doesn't make a sound. Not a scream, not a death cry. The body of the iguaçu simply splits in two and falls into the water behind me.

That's the signal for the head-to-head contest to begin.

“—!!”

A swirl of flashing wings rushes toward me.

I intercept them all, Hakugen gripped tightly in my hand. As soon as my right arm swings down, I bring it slicing up again. An instant later, the next bullet barrels toward me and I bend my head aside to dodge it. At the same time, I slice through three suicide bombers with a single swing of my blade. Thirty-seven times, I intercept the head-on, high-speed attacks. The first wave of murderous swallows swoops low over the water's surface and then soars upward before launching a second attack from all directions.

I wield my knife at the flashes of light that rain down from the dome like shooting stars until they become a blur of speed and force.

“—!!”

The sharp beak of an iguaçu grazes me just above my armor. Sparks fly from my dir-adamantite shoulder guard, and my Undine cloth undershirt tears as a spray of blood spurts upward. The wound rips wider as I cut the enemy's wing.

Once again, I'm dripping sweat. My whole body is hot. My head feels about ready to burn off. All four limbs are screaming at me as if to ask, *Wasn't there another way?* My heart argues back. The Firebolt couldn't destroy a flock of birds because it targets only one point, not a wide area. In exchange for killing a couple of birds, my body would be pierced with dozens of holes. This really is the only way.

My speed, which has garnered so much praise, is my only advantage.

But my enemies are staking their lives on this fight, too—

Each flash of light is a life put on the line. A deathblow dealt at high speed. The reason the impact is so strong is that they're turning their very lives into attacks. They think nothing of the consequences but simply fly forward with the goal of piercing their enemy.

That's why I, too, have to keep on swinging my arm without pausing to think.

—This is a contest of endurance!!

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!”

I give myself over entirely to my adventurer's instinct as I draw arc after glittering white arc around me.

The speed of my knife accelerates.

At the same time, my ability to accurately perceive the enemy

improves.

It's like my intuition had been off, but now that I've been driven into a tight spot, my physical and mental selves are melding together

More, more, more!

I think back to the continuous slashing attack that I experienced at the hands of my idol that night in the labyrinth town.

As I remember the fierce and beautiful Sword Princess, I weave the song of my blade, pushing it as fast as it can go.

Just at that moment—

“—!!”

I slice through the last bird drilling down on me from straight above.

The glittering white blade efficiently cuts out its magic stone, and instantly the iguaçu's body turns to ash and scatters in the wind.

I stop, still poised with my knife at the end of its trajectory. A spray of water falls like a gentle rain on my flushed cheeks.

My extreme level of concentration eases, and the sound of the Great Falls fills my ears. I relax my stance and look around.

Hundreds of drop items—the severed feathers of the iguaçu—are floating in the shallow water around me.

“...I...did it...”

I made it through a mass outbreak of iguaçu.

I wipe the trails of blood off my cheeks and arms and lower the hand that still holds Hakugen. My body feels sluggish.

I was forced to make a stand, and there's no question that I've used up quite a bit of time and energy in the process.

But I've started to understand some things...

Taking drastic measures is different from being reckless.

Still, there will come a time when I have to take a risk—in other words, when I have to adventure.

It may be a year from now, or a day from now, or maybe a couple of seconds from now. I have no idea. I've got to prepare for that time, in all sorts of ways.

I always have to reach for my personal best. I have to prepare myself, physically and mentally.

That's definitely what first-tier adventurers do. It's the only way to avoid having regrets.

Now that I've undergone this Dungeon baptism, I feel like I've grown as an adventurer.

I slip my new weapon, Hakugen, into its sheath.

Just then, I hear a sound that catches me by surprise.

A sound that's totally out of place in the tense atmosphere of the Dungeon—the sound of clapping.

“Huh?” I sputter idiotically.

There's no way a monster can be applauding an adventurer. Ordinarily I'd assume it was another adventurer. But there's no sign of anyone else near the plunge pool.

As my mind searches for another answer, I slowly look over my shoulder and see—

“—”

The top of the enormous waterfall leading to the twenty-sixth floor.

And there on a crystal strand, back to the magnificent scenery, is a fishtail covered with translucent green scales. In contrast to this lower body the same shade as the emerald-blue Great Falls is a faint indigo-blue *human upper body*.

She has smooth, clear skin; a pair of bare, well-shaped breasts; long hair the same color as her lower body; and in place of ears, two cute fins. Her eyes are resplendent jade.

I gasp at the sight of this beautiful “girl” as she shakes the shells and pearls decorating her hair.

“A mermaid...” I mumble.

I can't take my eyes off this creature who is endowed with such un-monster-like beauty.

As if to praise my display of martial skills against the iguaçu, or perhaps out of pure admiration, she smiles and innocently claps her hands.





“Oh brave warrior, oh strong hero, oh covetous, cruel champion. Prove your desire for the queen’s girdle.”

A song was being woven.

The sonorous chant threaded its way among the ferocious howls of a monster. Aisha dodged her enemies’ claws and fangs, casting her spell even as she assaulted them with her *podao* and long legs.

It was a Concurrent Chant.

“My famished blade is Hippolyta!”

A moment later, the Amazon—who had been chanting at the same time as she attacked and evaded multiple monsters—finished her spell and unleashed her magic.

“Hell Kaios!”

Her *podao*, which she had thrown onto the ground, threw off a huge cutting wave like the fin on a shark’s back that shredded through every monster in the party’s path. It sliced through not only a number of tough blue crabs but also the devil mosquitoes hovering in the air and even a large-class aqua serpent.

“Damn! It even works in the water!”

“Bell Cranell is something, but Antianeira can hold her own...”

Welf, who was guarding the party, and Ouka, who was carrying one of the wounded, stared fearfully at the spectacle. The Hell Kaios had moved off land to cut through the water, laying bare the streambed as it blew away every obstacle in their path.

As water flowed back into the streambed with a rush, Aisha—who had been fighting the monsters single-handedly—swung her *podao* onto her shoulder and looked back toward Welf.

“Okay, let’s get going while the path is still clear. If they surround us, even I won’t be able to protect you guys completely.”

“Fine words from someone who just wiped out a whole pack of monsters by herself...” Daphne muttered at the outstanding second-tier adventurer. She was carrying Luvis over her shoulder.

For now, the party had left defense to Aisha while the others carried the wounded elven adventurers. As they began to once again move through the labyrinth, Lilly rustled around for a Dual Potion and handed it to the sweaty Amazon.

“Miss Aisha, are you all right?”

She paused to reach her hands out to a small cascading waterfall and noisily gulp down some Dungeon water.

“Want me to be strong and say I’m just fine? Seriously, though,

the reason I can keep going like this is because I have support from your insane magic swords,” she answered, wiping her mouth.

Ouka, Mikoto, Daphne, and even the weak Haruhime were carrying the *Modi Familia* adventurers. Cassandra had Chigusa on her back, which meant that five members of the party were unable to fight. No matter how hard Aisha fought for them, it was an extremely risky breakdown in terms of proceeding through the lower levels.

To make up for the imbalance, Welf and Lilly were playing exquisite backup with their dagger-style Crozzo Magic Swords. Their high-speed, high-power attacks had taken down quite a few monsters that Aisha was unable to reach, and thanks to their combined efforts, the party had thus far been able to proceed without great danger.

“I wish we could have used Malboro...” Lilly said.

“Didn’t we just hear that water-dwelling monsters aren’t very sensitive to smells from land? The enhanced species doesn’t seem to be able to smell, either. Anyway, if we let out that god-awful smell right now, it just might finish off these wounded elves!”

Welf was half-joking as he responded to Lilly’s comment about the Malboro stink bags, which kept monsters away by releasing a hideous smell. However, his words did little to lighten the feeling of tense urgency consuming the party as they continued through the blue crystal labyrinth.

Just then, Aisha, who was leading the party, started in surprise.

“Miss Aisha?”

“Is it a monster?”

“No, those footsteps sound like—adventurers.”

Aisha’s words startled Lilly and Welf. As she had predicted, no sooner did they round a corner with a cave entrance in it than they bumped into a group of adventurers.

“Dormul, is it you...?”

“Luvis, Luvis!! Ye are alive!!”

The elf raised his head from Daphne’s shoulder. The dwarf shouting his name had eyes as narrow as threads, a big nose, and at around 170 celches was quite tall for his race. His head and body were covered in brown heavy armor, and both hands gripped battle hammers.

Lilly and the others guessed right away that these must be the *Magni Familia* adventurers Luvis had spoken about.

“Mr....Dormul, is it? We are of *Hestia Familia*, and we are on an expedition,” the prum announced.

“Oh-ho, the kin of Rabbit Foot! So that enhanced species attacked you, too...?”

One look at the ivy-tangled Chigusa was enough to tell Dormul what had happened.

His party consisted of four members, all of them hearty Level-3 dwarves dressed in tough full-plate armor. But the battered state of that armor spoke to how worn down the party had become.

Without exception, each member was parasitized by a vine.

“You guys can move? Even with those plants on you...?” Ouka asked in amazement. The dwarf laughed off his comment.

“Yo-ho-ho! We are dwarves! Far stronger than those weakly elves!” he said in his thick accent.

It was clear from the black circles under his eyes, however, that his words were mere bluster. Most likely, he was pushing himself through a forced march for the sake of his party.

“Yes, you damned dwarves *are* far better than us burdensome elves...” Luvis said with a self-mocking laugh. But the dwarf lost his taste for banter when faced with his limp former rival.

“Eh, Luvis...what good will that kind of talk do...?” he said, exhaustion spreading over his face as he looked at the haggard elf he would normally relish quarreling with.

“Dormul...did you find the party our quest was searching for?”

“...Aye, we found them. Their corpses, that is...They were at a safety point below this level.”

Luvis raised his delicate eyebrows, and Dormul nodded gravely.

“A safety point?” Lilly said, parroting the unexpected words.

“Aye. They were hidden where no one would find them. They had bite marks all over them, and their corpses were shriveled and dry. Those vines were wrapped around them, and flowered at that...”

“S-so that means...?”

“Aye. The enhanced species was lying in wait at the safety point, and it killed the adventurers.”

Shock shot through Lilly and the others.

Monsters couldn't spawn in safety points. The enhanced species had launched its surprise attack knowing full well that adventurers at a safety point would have their guard down. It had waited for its prey to make themselves vulnerable.

“I thought I was beyond surprise...but that monster knows a damn lot of things it shouldn't,” Aisha said. Her irritation and disgust expressed the feelings of the whole party.

A monster that had learned the habits of adventurers. It was unheard of.

“That rumor about it being even worse than The Bloodstained Troll may not be far from the truth,” the Amazon added.

“Do you have any more information? Anything you can tell us about the enhanced species' habitat or its weak points...?”

“Nay. It attacked us as we were hurrying back to Rivira, I'm sorry to say...We beat it, we slashed it, but it seemed to feel nothing. Even

our trustworthy thunderbolt magic swords didn't do much..."

"So, as we suspected, the only thing that clearly works is Mr. Bell's Firebolt..." Lilly said.

"Which means its weak point must be fire...Li'l E, would you take out the red magic sword? I'll use that one," Welf responded.

He had been carrying a thunderbolt-type dagger, but now he took the longer blade that Lilly withdrew from the backpack and stuck it into the sword belt slung crosswise over his back.

"What does yer party plan to do now? Given our condition, we beg that ye let us join with ye..."

"Not a problem. It is the rule of adventurers to help one another in times of trouble. Lilly and her companions will make our way to the connecting passageway on this floor and establish a base there," the prum said, acceding to Dormul's plea before quickly explaining their plan. The dwarf agreed, then glanced at Daphne, who was still holding Luvis. She jumped as he boldly walked toward her.

"Give him to me! I'll take that weak piece of baggage!"

"Dormul, you—"

"Don't get me wrong! I'm ashamed to say we can't fight much, and we've used up all our items and magic swords! But...we can still do the work of a supporter!"

He snatched Luvis forcefully from Daphne and threw him over his broad shoulders. The other dwarves did the same, taking the wounded elves from Mikoto, Haruhime, and Ouka. Luvis looked at them in surprise, but Dormul cut him off by spitting on the ground, as if to say, *Don't you dare thank me for this.*

Meanwhile, Lilly and the others were marveling at the toughness of the dwarf race. No one could be counted on more than a dwarf at a difficult time like this. That was one reason adventurers often recruited them as heavy fighters.

"Th-thank you very much! I don't know how to express our gratitude..." said Cassandra.

"You've really saved us, thanks!" added Daphne.

"I-it's nothing! Brute labor is the work of dwarves! This is no job for d-d-d-d-dainty little ladies!"

The stammering dwarf turned away, flushed to his ears, as he answered the two beautiful girls—Cassandra with her droopy eyes that aroused the desire to protect and Daphne with her wide-open, slanted pair. They were so attractive they had even invited flirtation from Apollo. The reactions of the other aged dwarves weren't much different.

Even Lilly, who was practically allergic to adventurers, giggled at their behavior.

"I'm glad they're such pleasant fellows," she said.

“Okay, guys, if everything’s been sorted out, let’s get going,” Aisha said.

The group obeyed. Although their numbers had swelled with the addition of the dwarf supporters, they moved more lightly now. Ouka and the others were able to resume their fighting roles.

“By the way, what happened to Bell Cranell? Uh, ye—lovely renart?”

The nervous Dormul directed his question toward Haruhime, who was even more beautiful than Daphne or Cassandra.

“...Um, Master Bell is...”

Behind them, Lilly grasped the belt of her backpack tightly in both hands as she listened to their conversation.



The sound of clapping is still ringing through the cavern, mingled with the crashing of the waterfall.

Like a child, the mermaid looks into my dazzled face with her sparkling jade eyes.

Judging from her appearance, she would be a little older than me in human years—probably around Aiz’s age. Her under-pearl hair ornaments look perfect on this girl from the water’s edge.

A monster that claps for humans...I know of only one type of monster that displays such a friendly attitude.

“Are you...?”

I manage to form a few words despite my dazed state. She tilts her head adorably, opens her eyes wide, and brings her hand to her mouth as if to say, *I really shouldn’t...*

No way, this can’t be what I’m thinking—

Just as an image of Wiene’s face flashes across my mind, something interrupts my thoughts.

“AAAAAAA!”

“?! ”

The sounds of wings beating air and high-pitched cries are coming from high above. I look up and see a flock of harpies and sirens. The monsters soaring through the upper realm of the cavern have noticed me, and their eyes glitter exactly like hawks peering down on their prey. Of course—there’s no way they could have failed to notice the racket I made fighting the iguaçu...!

“!”

I grind my teeth. The “girl” shudders in surprise and quickly dives into the water. To tell the truth, it’s agonizing to see her go, but I have to get her out of my mind for the time being. I’m facing a fight with

these winged monsters even though I'm still totally exhausted from the iguaçu.

“SHAAAAAAAAA!”

“—AAH!!”

Both the harpy and the siren have the faces of women and the bodies of birds. One has dark-red plumage, while the other's feathers are a glaring shade of yellow. Both are uglier than old crones, their faces engraved with deep wrinkles. Now and then, a whiff of their body odor reaches my nose. It smells like excrement and is totally out of place in this Water Capital. Looking at them, I realize how far Rei and Fia have deviated from the norms of their race.

While both types of monster are bird-human hybrids, harpies have greater flying abilities, while sirens are able to emit irregular sound waves as they fly. In other words, one can attack from close range and the other from a distance. As I move to intercept a harpy that swoops toward me with her hooked claws prepared for attack, I keep half my attention on the sirens hovering high above my head and releasing sound waves.

“Yah!”

“EEE?!”

I dodge the hooked claws and slash the Divine Knife toward the harpy. As a fountain of blood and feathers spurts from her severed neck, the other harpies dive toward me. I use Hakugen to deal with them.

I think back to my battle with the harpies in the Beor Mountain Range, where I got lost with the goddess and Aiz. These individuals are far swifter than those who live on land, but at least I know how they fight. That gives me a huge advantage. Even if I'm exhausted from fighting the iguaçu, opponents of this caliber aren't going to take me down. I can feel the new level of toughness that my Level-4 status has brought. I drive my left foot into the last of the harpies, crushing her jaw.

“—AAA!!”

Leaping back, I barely avoid the sound wave a siren releases an instant later. Water splashes up where the sound wave makes contact with the shallows, and a crystal cluster nearby blossoms with cracks before crumbling into the water. She may not be as strong as Rei, but her power still poses a threat.

The four sirens appear hesitant to engage me in close combat, and none shows signs of descending from high above.

In that case...

“Firebolt!”

“?!”

I extend my right arm, steady it with my left, and exercise my

magic without restraint.

The only thing I've got plenty of right now is mental strength. As I repeatedly fire at and miss the four sirens flying freely through the air, I take full advantage of the characteristics of my Swift-Strike Magic.

I shoot rapid-fire and at random.

Time and again, high-powered electrical fire pierces the air. The sirens swerve desperately to avoid the shots, unable to return my attack with their sound waves. They're showing more and more signs of exhaustion. Without pause, I aim for them. One by one, the bolts of fire pierce the sirens, and their corpses tumble into the center of the plunge pool.

"Whew..."

I lower my right arm.

I've taken out all my enemies...but as I feared, "she" still hasn't reappeared. If I had the chance, there's a lot I would have liked to ask her.

I look around the now-quiet landscape...and hear something splash.

I shiver. Has the mermaid returned? Relaxing my defensive pose, I turn around.

"—OO-LA-LA."

The creatures perched on a clump of crystals near the shore are definitely mermaids but...not *that* mermaid!

These are the real thing!

There are two of them on the reef. Their hair is the drab green of a withered plant, and their bodies are half-fish, half-human. Mermaids are among the rare monsters of this floor. While they are more attractive than harpies, there is something distinctly creepy about the pure-white eyes and bluish-white skin that seems to have no blood running beneath it.

They take advantage of my momentary lapse in wariness to smile at me and then open their mouths.

"LAAA—..."

A strange, ruinous song designed to seduce unfortunate travelers floats toward me.

This is not good!!

Outwitted, I realize too late they've beaten me to the punch. Still, I press my hands to my ears.

Mermaids have almost no ability to engage in direct battle; their single atrocious weapon is the charm they inflict through their songs. These charms are uniquely nasty, even when compared to the limited number of other "irregular ailments" out there. The illness they inflict has its roots in the mind, and it cannot be healed with items or blocked with abilities. In other words, it's a psychological attack.

Adventurers seduced by these songs at times are lured into the water, and at other times they become deranged and fight with their own companions. The only preventative measures are to block one's ears or resist the mermaids' ruinous songs with unyielding mental strength.

I've made the mistake of listening to quite a lot of the mermaids' song. I clench my teeth and wait, but—

“...Huh?”

—nothing strange happens.

I'm not drawn to them. I don't stumble toward the water. My heart doesn't flutter. They're still singing their song of ruin as I remove my hands from my ears and look down at them. I rack my brain for an explanation. The mermaids on the reef are also clearly shaken by the fact that their charm is not working on me.

“Uh...Firebolt?”

“EAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

At a loss for what else to do, I thrust out my right hand and release a bolt of electric fire. The mermaids take a direct hit, let out a scream, and flee into the water.

“What in the world just happened...?”

As far as I know, I don't have any pricey accessories or items on me that would render their charms ineffective...

But then again, I did argue with Ishtar, the goddess of beauty, whose seductiveness is said to far outstrip the charm of a monster...so maybe I built up my resistance without knowing it?

Sweating, I rub my fingers over my back, which seems to have been growing gradually hotter over the past few minutes.

“...You're okay?”

I jump at the sound of a beautiful, bell-clear voice.

When I turn my head, I see that *she* has popped up beside a crystal bank that looks like a rock. She sounds as if she's worried about me. Her voice is timid, and she's hiding her upper body, while her lower body is still underwater.

I freeze for a minute, then slowly walk toward her so as not to startle her. Maybe she's not very cautious, or maybe she's extremely curious. The expression on her face is either uneasiness because I've neither tried to attack nor harmed her—a talking monster—or deep interest in me.

She definitely was speaking in our language a second ago.

Yup, I'm sure now—

I get down on one knee in front of where she is hiding in the shadow of the crystals.

“Are you...a Xenos?!”

At the word *Xenos*, her jade eyes widen. The next instant, she

hurls herself from behind the crystal and flings both arms around my neck.

“Ack!”

I reflexively try to lean back as her round, bare breasts leap into full view, but her arms prevent me from moving. Like an idiot, I turn red. The mermaid brings her nose to the base of my neck and sniffs.

“You smell like Rei...”

Hearing Rei’s name brings me back to my senses. So she knows Rei, a Xenos and a siren.

“Um, do you know any of the other Xenos? Like Lido or Gros...?”

“Yes! Lido is cute...and Gros is shy. Right?”

I peel her thin shoulders away from my neck. She tilts her head and smiles.

Cute...shy...those words don’t match up with the lizardman and the gargoyle I know...but this girl’s behavior is unmistakable. She’s a Xenos. You could call it pure luck that I met up with her here.

I somehow get her to remove her arms from around my neck, and she peers at me from close range. I can’t decide what to ask her first. Finally, I open my mouth.

“Uh, my name is Bell. What’s yours?”

That’s what I’d do with a human. She shakes her emerald-blue hair and tilts her head again with a confused expression.

“...?”

I point to myself and repeat my name.

“Bell, Bell, Bell.”

After I’ve done this a few times, she smiles beautifully and claps.

“Bell!”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I’m Mari!”

She’s both learned my name and shared her own.

So I’ve met a mermaid named Mari.

It’s hard to tell for sure yet, but compared to Wiene and Rei, her communication ability seems slightly weak. Her words strike me as immature or clumsy...

As I’m thinking about what to ask her next, she slowly, quietly puts her pointer finger in her mouth.

Then she bites it, and as blood oozes from the top, she sticks it under my nose.

“Bell.”

“Y-yes?”

“Eat it!”

What...?

I stand there gaping, my mind frozen. She sticks her finger into my mouth. *Wait a second!!*

“Lick it!”

What?!

“Suck it!”

Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!

My face is instantly on fire. Her finger draws a circle, invading the inside of my mouth. *Oh crap—?! Stop wriggling it around in my mouth!! Now it's tangled up with my tongue...!!*

I turn bright red and erupt with sweat. I can't breathe correctly. I grab her right hand and try to pull it out, but she won't let me. Instead she turns her finger into a hook and digs it into my gums. Ouch ouch ouch!

“Hurry up—!!”

She's got her whole upper body glued to me now. My body is as stiff as a stone. She may be a monster, but she's also a beautiful girl, and she's pressing herself onto me. Tears are welling up in my eyes, but I obey her order.

I lick her finger and suck in, drinking down the saliva that's pooled in my mouth.

She doesn't act like my tongue licking her finger tickles. She just smiles happily. When I figure I've done enough and try to pull away, she cries out, “More!”

My face is impossibly hot. Smoke is pouring from my ears. Almost literally. The truth is, this might be the most embarrassed I've ever felt. If not the most, it's at least among the top three. It ranks right up there with seeing Aiz and the other *Loki Familia* women bathing and having Haruhime fall on top of me in the red-light district.

For some reason, the memory of my grandfather's refreshing laugh as he stuck up his pointer finger passes through my mind.

If someone saw us now, they'd think we were doing something crazier than if we were lovers...!

More people appear in my mind's eye. There are Lilly and the goddess, arms crossed forbiddingly. There is Aiz, staring fixedly at me. And there is Eina, smiling with her mouth but not her eyes.

As my body starts to shake violently and inexplicably...I finally notice something.

“Fwha, fwhat?” I say, finger still in my mouth. I look down at my arms and body. The sluggish feeling is gone, and the energy I lost in my fight with the iguaçu seems to be back...

No way...I'm fully recovered?

My astonishment must be obvious. There's no doubt about it. I'm completely back to normal.

Mari narrows her eyes and finally pulls her finger from my mouth. That's when I realize what happened. Her blood healed my body.

“Oh right, mermaid lifeblood...”

It's a drop item produced by the rare species. Classified as a recovery-type item, mermaid blood is rumored to restore energy, heal wounds, and even reverse the effects of poison. There's no need to process it in any way. It's as exceedingly rare as unicorn horns...

I see now. She was worried about my injuries and wanted to heal me.

"Um...thank you very much."

I bow my head in appreciation, and the Xenos mermaid smiles brightly back at me. Then she stares down at her sticky, saliva-covered finger. The moment I see her do that, I grab her wrist by force.

Using the bottom of the Undine cloth I'm wearing, I vigorously wipe her finger. Mari gives me a blank look, and I turn red. I'm trying to eradicate all trace of my saliva. To finish off my work, I plunge her entire hand into the water.

Even though I've regained my strength, I'm panting loudly, and my shoulders are heaving like I'm going to run out of energy again.

"Let's go...there?"

"Huh...?"

"I...don't like here."

Mari taps my shoulder, and I look up at her. She seems worried.

I follow her gaze. Far above us, I can make out some shapes that are likely harpies and sirens, perhaps newly spawned from the Dungeon. Then I remember...monsters hunt the Xenos, too.

Mari is right. Visibility is good in this large cavern, and monsters can easily target us. Adventurers who emerge onto the cliff when they arrive on this floor could even spot us. I agree with the mermaid's decision to move.

"Uh, over there? In the labyrinth...?"

"Yes!"

She points to a cave on the northeast side of the cavern. At first I'm skeptical that a half-fish, half-human will be able to walk overland to get there, but I manage to decipher her gestures and figure out that there's a hole at the bottom of the plunge pool that's connected to the waterways inside the labyrinth. Monsters that are swept over the Great Falls use this hole to get back inside.

Mari dives under, and I step out of the shallow water. Gazing up at the ajura tree, I head back inside the crystal labyrinth for a second time.

"But...how are we going to meet up? I have no idea where the plunge pool connects to the streams..."

As this basic problem with our plan dawns on me, I stand bewildered at a fork in the path, which is already becoming complicated.

Damn. We really should have figured this out ahead of time...

I'm standing there worrying when I hear a song.

"LAA..."

The voice singing it is smooth and clear. This wordless string of la-las doesn't seem to be a monster's chant intended to lead humans astray. Instead, the gentle, sweet melody reminds me of an approaching wave or the ocean on a moonlit night.

"A song that echoes through the labyrinth..."

I let the song guide me forward, my soul trembling at its beauty.

After I've proceeded forward for a while without encountering any monsters, I arrive at a small room. A mermaid is sitting on the boundary of water and land, singing. The sight of her illuminated by the moonlight-like glow of the crystals, eyes closed as she smiles and croons to herself, is so beautiful and mysterious that it captivates me.

"Bell. ♪"

The mermaid notices me and waves. I return to my senses and hurry over to her.

The water in this room is not a stream but instead a spring. Mari is sitting on a rocklike crystal at its edge. As I approach this girl surrounded by crystal the bluish shade of ice...I turn red all over again.

"...?"

"Oh, nothing, it's just..."

I mumble incoherently as I stare at her defenseless upper body. Especially at her chest.

Even putting aside what happened out in the plunge pool, which wasn't what it seemed anyway, I can't help looking no matter how hard I try. The locks of hair that hang down on both sides just barely hide her breasts, but still...

After I've glanced at her chest a bunch of times and turned bright red, she claps as if she's understood.

"Wait!"

Smiling, she dives into the spring, and I wait for around a minute. When she bursts through the water's surface again, her long emerald-blue hair is pulled behind her head, and I hurriedly throw my arm over my face to avoid seeing too much. Then I notice she's covered her chest with something.

"Sh-shell underwear...?"

"Just like Bell and his friends!"

While underwater, she's donned a...um...b-bikini made of shells and string. The blue shells are plastered to the indigo-blue mounds on her chest.

By "just like Bell and his friends," she must mean the fact that she's wearing clothes. It's true that Amazons wear something similar... Aside from the pearl and shell decorations in her hair, she seems

interested in the clothing of adventurers. Maybe she's copied us.

I smile wryly as she stretches out her arms and poses as if to ask my opinion. She's acting like a little girl, but I can't help finding it endearing.

Still...her face is so gorgeous it's like an eye magnet, and she likes to play dress-up. Could she really have hidden her true identity from other adventurers up till now...?

Maybe because she's noticed my gaze (or maybe not), she smiles and starts to fuss with her hair. She pulls the damp locks in front of her face as if to say, *I always do it like this*. The green hair sticks to her face, hiding most of it, including her eyes. Even though she's smiling, I have to agree...if she did this, no one would guess a thing. Actually, she looks fairly scary.

Maybe this is what the goddess meant when she talked about "horror."

She definitely doesn't match up with the Xenos I've met in the past...For one, she clapped at me and talked to me in a worried voice. She's innocent, and her words and actions are immature. She's full of curiosity, too. But judging from the fact that she knows Lido and the other Xenos, she probably isn't newly spawned from the Dungeon.

Since meeting her, I've felt that she's somehow different from Rei or Wiene. Now I'm sure she is.

How can I put it? She's less like a Xenos and more like...a spirit, which I've heard have less developed senses of self.

"Uh, so, Miss Mari..."

"Miss Mari? I am Mari."

"No, *miss* is a word we attach to names. It's like a part of human culture..."

"I am Mari."

"...Mari."

I can't help giving in to her naive behavior as she brings her face close to mine. My face has been bright red this whole time as I watch her frolicking around happily.

"...So, uh, Mari? Are Lido or any of the other Xenos on this floor?" I ask, having decided to try to make contact with Wiene.

"Lido and the other ones went up," she says, looking toward the crystal ceiling.

Up? Does she mean up to the middle levels? Or...up to the surface?

Despite my uncertainty, I don't pursue the question further. All I know is that I won't be able to call on Lido and the others for help.

"They always do it."

"Huh?"

"I can't fly like Rei or walk like Lido."

“...”

“So they always leave me here.”

Mari pouts as she haltingly strings together her clumsy words. It's the particular complaint of a mermaid, who is unable to move around on land. Guessing from her words, she might not have met Wiene yet.

As I stand here thinking, Mari slaps her tail on the ground loudly, presses both hands on the crystal rock, and pulls herself up onto it.

“Bell, let's talk!”

She's pestering me as if she's excited that someone who's not one of her brethren has accepted her. Her cheeks are flushed and she's smiling, overjoyed at her first visitor. She's really just like a spirit.

If the situation was different, I'd be happy to chat with her endlessly, but...

“Mari, listen to me. I want to go back to my friends.”

“...?”

“Will you take me to some places where people might be?”

I look into her eyes as I ask this favor. I'll never manage to find my party by wandering randomly around the Dungeon. Plus, without a map, it will be hard to find my way back to the room where I was pulled underwater. I desperately want Mari—who I assume knows her way around this floor—to help me.

She lowers her eyebrows sadly and shakes her head.

“You can't go.”

“Huh...?”

“There is a scary thing in here now.”

I stand there frozen and unbelieving.

“Mari, do you know about the enhanced species? Uh, the one that's green, and big, and has yellow eyes...?”

“...Yes.”

She nods as I list all its characteristics to make sure we're talking about the same monster. Mari knows about the moss huge!

“The very scary thing...the one that ate a lot of Bell's friends...”

“...! I want to do something about that monster! Do you know where it is?”

“No. You can't. Bell, don't go.”

“Mari...!”

She just keeps shaking her head as I plead with her. And that's not all. When I ignore her warning, she tries to hold me back so I can't leave. She's gripping my Undine cloth sleeve tightly in her delicate fingers.

“It will eat Bell and me...It's scary. Everyone is afraid of it...!”

I bite my lip as she lets out a heartrending cry and throws her arms around me.



Drops of water pattered onto the ground from his soaking wet body.

At the same time, he crashed his feet violently down, sending fissures through the crystal ground. He was moving through part of the labyrinth with evident irritation.

He stroked the surface of his body with his fat fingers. Much of his moss had been burned off, and the pain was tormenting him. The pain came from the fire that the human boy with white hair had thrown at him. He, the hunter, had been outwitted by a rabbit and seriously wounded. His body, just now emerged from the stream, trembled with anger.

But that was in the past.

The white-haired boy had fallen over the waterfall. He knew about that. When humans fell over the waterfall, they did not survive. The boy was probably smashed to pieces, his brain spattered across the water. When he thought about that, he felt a little relieved. He wouldn't have to suffer through that strange, dangerous fire again.

But he needed to be cautious. He realized that. After he walked down the path for a little while, he broke another crystal column and slid into one of the nests he had built inside the labyrinth.

Stinking lumps that had once been humans were scattered on the ground. They were his emergency rations. He pushed them around violently and pulled off the things attached to their bodies. He had been interested for a while now in the gear they wore. He'd seen it protect other humans from the fiery breath of monsters. With his clumsy fat fingers, he attached the cloth to his own body, covering it with the moss that was rapidly growing back, forcefully burying it under his skin. Then, to fill his stomach before he set to work, he ate every last corpse he had set aside as emergency rations. It was almost time to attack the gang of humans.

The seeds told him that the humans had clustered together and were moving in a group. If they had been by themselves, it would have been easy to kick them about, but such a large group was risky. Regardless of the seeds he had planted, he was still outnumbered. The brown female whose presence was as strong as the white-haired boy's was still in good condition. Last time, they had noticed his trap just before he snapped it shut. He would have to use a more foolproof method this time so they couldn't escape.

—Yes, that's it! I'll use that one I haven't used recently.

He had been standing still and silent as he thought, but now he began to move.

He did not take any weapons from his mother, the Dungeon. He

emerged from the nest and began walking through the crystal cave, his ominous shadow swaying on the walls.

And then, he mercilessly pursued the group of adventurers.



“...?”

Aisha was the first to notice the change.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” asked Welf, who had been peering around warily, as he looked up toward the Amazon at the front of the party.

“...It’s strange how noisy the Dungeon is.”

Aisha tucked her hair behind her ears and listened more closely. The party was in the northwestern section of the floor, in one of the higher portions of the indigo crystal labyrinth in the cliff’s interior. The Level-4 adventurer was sensitively gathering information from the vibrations that reached the wide main route via the many tunnels that crossed it.

“You don’t think it’s a stream trap, do you?”

“No, it’s not that. This is...”

If you sense a change, escape. Even if you don’t know exactly what it is, get away from it. That was an ironclad rule among adventurers.

Aisha drew her eyebrows together as her intuition throbbed. She was about to issue instructions to the group when Mikoto shouted out.

“—! Monsters are coming!”

Just as her detection skill had swiftly warned her, a large number of monsters appeared in the passage in front of them.

“A pack of monsters...! At a time like this!” Ouka shouted.

“I have no choice; I’m gonna use the magic sword!” Welf, who was standing next to him, answered. He leaped forward, gripping the hilt of the crimson sword. Moving up next to Aisha, he prepared to draw it from the belt on his back.

“—”

Ignoring their actions, Mikoto once again reacted to something. Her beautiful face froze.

“Mikoto?” Lilly asked suspiciously.

“...They’re coming from *behind*, too—”

Hearing this response, Lilly stiffened. She glanced behind her. A pack of monsters as numerous as the one in front was pressing toward them, their roars and countless footsteps thundering down the passage.

“What the...?!”

“W-wait a second! They’re coming from the right and left, too!!”

“And from a diagonal!”

Daphne's and Haruhime's screams echoed the sound of their enemy's advance, which was like a nightmare roaring with laughter. Welf, who had been on the verge of drawing his magic sword, was in shock. Both he and the gaping Ouka stood frozen, looking back. The elves and dwarves tormented by parasitic vines went pale, too.

"Shit! What the fuck is happening?!" Aisha cursed as masses of monsters invaded the main route from every direction. Then, as she scanned their surroundings, *podao* at the ready, she saw it.

"Crap—"

It was far down the passageway.

Way beyond the pack of approaching monsters, the hideous dark-green giant was slowly emerging from a tunnel.

Its hands were stained red. Not with the blood of adventurers but with the blood of monsters.

The awful truth dawned on Aisha. The screams of the monsters rushing toward them were not threats. They were screams of terror. Some of them even had parasitic vines growing from them. They were racing into the main route as if they were being herded from the other passages.

"...You're fucking kidding me."

Aisha's eyes met the yellow eyes of the moss huge. As the monster's emotionless gaze pierced the Amazon, she shouted a jeer.

"What kind of monster does a pass parade?!"



The Dungeon is thundering.

That sound is either many monsters roaring at once or monsters marching.

The vibrations barely—but unmistakably—reach the room Mari and I are in. We look up at the ceiling in surprise.

Fragments of crystal fall like a dusting of light onto the spring, sending out small ripples.

"...Mari, listen to me."

I put my hands on the fragile shoulders of the mermaid, who is hugging my chest, and gently peel her away. She looks up at me with an anxious expression.

"I will kill them. Definitely."

Her eyes widen.

As if I am reasoning with a child or imploring a spirit, I beg the monster girl.

"I promise I won't let them scare you, Mari. I'll kill all the scary things. So...please take me there."

My little speech sets my teeth on edge. The ordinary me would probably be blushing and unable to say words like that. Now, though, I'm able to speak them easily.

I speak them in order to save my companions and soothe these trembling little shoulders.

I gaze into the wavering jade eyes.

"...Will you...protect me?"

The mermaid speaks slowly, her head tilted.

"Yes, I will protect you."

"Will you...help me?"

"—Yes! I'll help you!"

I make a promise to Wiene's kin, just like I did with Wiene herself.

She looks at me as I nod enthusiastically, then suddenly she smiles.

"Okay! I'll show you! I'll take you there!"

She looks up at the ceiling, still smiling brightly. Then she shuts her eyes, puts her hands to her chest, and begins to sing.

"LAAA..."

"?!"

I slap my hands onto my ears despite myself.

She is singing the type of discordant notes that can harm human ears. And she is belting them out so loudly I'm sure they'll echo through every corner of the Dungeon.

The song is different from the strange sound waves of a siren, or from the ruinous melody of a mermaid, or from the beautiful melody she sang earlier to guide me to her.

As I look at her in surprise, monsters' howls begin to echo toward us from deep in the labyrinth, one after the next.

"She's..."

"—I found them!"

She stops singing and opens her eyes.

"They say your friends are over there."

As she smiles at me, I guess what's just happened, and astonishment washes over me.

—She's just charmed the monsters?!

I can't believe it. But it's the only explanation.

Her song was not meant to seduce adventurers. It was a ballad to seduce monsters.

"The ones who are more obedient told me."

In other words, she's charmed monsters with lower ability than herself.

She dives into the spring and swims underwater in a gentle arc, popping up again in the center. Her hair and skin glistening, she looks at me and smiles.

“...”

Behind her is a stream that connects the spring to the waterways outside the room. A path follows along beside it.

There's no need for words. I nod at her and start running. She flips over, and together we fly out of the room.

“Let's go!”

To find my friends, I race across the crystal labyrinth as the mermaid cuts through the water beside me.

CHAPTER 6

THE HERO'S
SACRED FLAME



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CHAPTER 6

THE HERO'S SACRED FLAME

Roars gushed through the passages, accompanied by an unending thunder of footsteps.

Plagued by the parasitic vines, the monsters howled in rage and charged forward toward their prey.

The adventurers stood paralyzed before this terrifying scene.

“A monster’s pass parade...?!”

“Stop joking around! It’s not funny.”

As Lilly and Welf watched this artificially created—no, monster-created—event unfold, their panic mounted.

A pass parade induced by a monster. It was unheard of. This time the enhanced species wasn’t using itself as a decoy—it was using its superhuman strength and seed bullets to route other monsters from their lairs and drive them into the main route. They appeared from one passageway after the next like clockwork, cutting off the adventurers’ retreat.

“OOO...”

Aisha gritted her teeth and glared straight ahead. The enhanced species had disappeared from her field of view when it crossed the main route into another tunnel. The hideous, intelligent giant was hopping about deep in the labyrinth precisely as if to prepare a new assassination attempt.

“Run, you guys! Escape!”

The second-tier adventurer’s decision was instantaneous. She turned toward the party behind her and, with an urgent expression on her face, ordered them to flee.

“That enhanced species is planning to use the other monsters to destroy this area! There’s no way we can fight them with magic swords!”

Welf and the others were astonished by Aisha’s ability to accurately read the monster’s intentions. No matter how fierce the firepower of the Crozzo Magic Swords, they worked in only one direction at a time. Attempting to take down the monsters pressing in from every side would simply take too much time. The moment they succumbed to the enemies’ superior numbers and were overtaken by

the horde of monsters, it was over. As friend and foe mingled pell-mell, the battle would descend into chaos, and most likely all that would remain in the end would be the mercilessly trampled corpses of the adventurers.

But more than anything, the life span of the magic swords would do them in.

If the parade of monsters set upon them again after their blades had crumbled—

“Shit!” Welf spat out, even as he obeyed Aisha’s command. Returning his magic sword to its sheath, he took off running at full speed alongside Ouka. With them leading, the party dove into a passageway that branched off from the main route.

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

The howling monsters pursued them. Haruhime didn’t even have time to use the trick she had been holding back, her Level Boost. In the middle rank, the dwarves ran desperately, dripping sweat as they struggled to stay ahead of the nightmare barreling down on them. The elves on their backs, too, were hot with a fear unconnected to the parasitic vines wrapped around them.

“Huff, puff...Curses, I’m falling over my own feet!”

“Damn slow-footed dwarf...Run faster!”

“What?! Some nerve ye have when I’m carrying ye on my back!!”

As Dormul cursed the vines that were robbing his strength, Luvis whispered insults into his ear. Fueled by a spurt of rage, the dwarf increased his speed once again. Lilly watched from behind, her backpack swaying as she ran.

“I can’t tell if they’re friends or enemies...”

Luvis’s words certainly weren’t the equivalent of a carrot dangled in front of a horse’s nose. The same dynamic was playing out between the other dwarf-and-elf pairs.

As the injured adventurers desperately whipped themselves on in an attempt to keep the party’s speed up, Welf and Ouka launched into intercepting enemies.

“Get out of the way, Big Guy!”

“Oof!”

“GWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Welf brandished his magic sword as he ran toward the scattering of blue crabs blocking their way forward. His magic dagger—which he was carrying in addition to the crimson sword—released a streak of lightning. The monster’s flesh fried.

Ouka used his huge battle-ax to bat any enemies that got past Welf into the stream next to them. Their priority was to clear the path in front of them, not to pointlessly crush their opponents.

Aisha had fallen back to the rear guard to take on the horrendous

pass parade. That inevitably left Welf and Ouka to defend the vanguard.

“...Crap!”

Welf’s magic dagger crumbled noisily in his hand. Kicking aside the fragments of blade with a combination of distress and regret, he drew his greatsword from his back. In order to preserve his remaining magic sword for later, he would have to engage in hand-to-hand combat without the benefit of any tricks.

“Here I go, smith!”

“I’m right here by your side!!”

With the ax-wielding Ouka next to him, the young High Smith charged forward toward his enemies.



“Bell, this way!”

Mari’s voice leads me forward.

We’re inside the labyrinth on the twenty-fifth floor. I’m pumping my arms as I run while Mari swims forward, beating her tail against the water. The dryland path parallels the water, so we’re able to move ahead side by side. Again and again, I follow her pointing finger and turn into small passages that branch off one another.

“Bell’s friends are far over there! Many of my kind are there, too!”

Again and again, she urges me to hurry toward the adventurers, whose location she has determined by using her song. She seems to think the enhanced species is there, too. Sweat dripping down my cheeks, I kick off the crystal path to increase my speed.

“—GUAAAAAA!”

“An aqua serpent! Again?!”

The immense monster breaks the water’s surface with a tremendous splash, undulating its long light-green body so it is stretched across the stream. It’s aiming not for me but for Mari, who’s right below me.

“Mari!”

I thrust out my right hand.

“...!”

Her body has disappeared into the water.

“GUA!!”

The aqua serpent roars in surprise as its fangs meet air, and I pause in astonishment, too, still poised to shoot a Firebolt. In that instant, I catch just a glimpse of her. With a swift, graceful movement, almost as if she’s dancing, the mermaid slips past the long serpent’s body stretched across the stream.

—She’s unbelievably fast!!

Even among water-dwelling monsters, mermaids are often called “the birds of the water.” They are able to move with complete freedom within the water, and their speed and ability to turn in circles are unparalleled. Once they are in the water, they are impossible to kill. It’s one reason adventurers search so insanely for these rare monsters.

I thought she was a little absentminded, but she’s managed to avoid becoming prey for another monster.

Since she’s a Xenos, she’s probably even faster than ordinary mermaids.

“Bell! Over here, over here!”

“Ah, okay!”

Her face pops up behind the monsters as if she’s teleported herself there.

To my surprise, she swims faster than I can run. We leave the angrily roaring aqua serpent behind and continue forward. As the mermaid points the way, I can’t help but feel like the sort of spirit that might appear in a fairy tale is guiding me.

Of course, that doesn’t mean we can avoid combat altogether...!

I’m flying solo here, so I persistently fight each monster I encounter along the water’s edge. There’s a crystal turtle with multiple crystals projecting from its body, and a hideous devil mosquito that latches on to adventurers and sucks their blood, and even a light quartz that shoots out rays of light. I try to defeat them as quickly as possible, but I don’t have time to take on every single one. Making my way through the sprawling twenty-fifth floor to reunite with my party on its own requires quite a lot of time. It’s also extremely inefficient for Mari to continuously sing her charm songs. As the flustered mermaid navigates through the labyrinth, we’re forced to change our route numerous times.

After we change directions for the umpteenth time, something unexpected happens.

“Uhh...”

“The stream!”

The waterway that has been flowing alongside the dryland path suddenly breaks off. While the dryland path continues forward, the stream dead-ends into a kind of cove. Perhaps we ended up here because we’ve made so many turns, but there’s no way Mari can follow the path on land. I won’t be able to rely on her navigation.

“Bell, I’m sorry...From here on, I...”

Her shoulders sag dejectedly. Standing beside her, I try to think of another option. The solution that blares across my adventurer’s brain a second later is totally simple and totally primitive. I feel a strong

resistance to using it and frown, but this is no time to worry about appearances. I decide to go with it.

“Mari, I’m sorry!”

“Huh?—Eee!”

I splash into the cove and *lift the mermaid into my arms*. Then, like a prince carrying his princess, I climb back onto the land and dash forward.

“S-see, we can go together like this! I’m sorry!”

As I utter this half-excuse, half-apology, I accelerate even faster.

If there’s no place for her to swim, I might as well carry her. It’s completely obvious. But it also feels totally foolish...to run along carrying this girl with a fishtail for her lower body.

Her tail waves softly back and forth. She’s as meek as a lamb, but her shoulders are tense, and I catch her staring into my face, which is right next to hers. Her cheeks flush faintly when our eyes meet, and she rests her head against my chest.

This may well be the first time in history a human has run overland carrying a mermaid.

I wonder if this counts as outstanding excelia...For a moment, I let my mind wander away from the present situation and laugh drily.

In contrast, Mari’s eyes are sparkling.

“Wow!”

For the first time, the dryland scenery expands before her unsteady eyes. Crystal caves she has never seen before pass one after the next as the landscape changes dizzily. It must be like a dryland adventure for her. Her eyes are full of excitement and more joy than I’ve seen in them yet.

“Bell! This is amazing! I love it!”

“Okay, but heyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!! Please don’t hug me like that!”

She’s so excited to experience this unknown world that she’s gripping my neck. I can feel her firm breasts pressing onto me underneath her shell bikini top. I take a huge rabbit-like leap and jump over the swarm of blue crabs blocking our way forward.

If another adventurer saw me like this, my reputation would be done for...!

Bell Cranell tried to take a mermaid home with him. If word of that got around, I’d be branded as someone who has a monster fetish for real.

Dripping sweat and prodded on by all sorts of fears, I rush with renewed energy toward my destination.

“...Damn, I’m getting used to carrying women like this...”

“...?”

Mari tilts her head quizzically as I mutter this sudden thought.

First it was the goddess, then recently Haruhime. I even carried

Lilly in all the confusion...I think back on these incidents and let slip a pathetic chuckle. I feel like I've ended up so far from where I started...

I have a funny feeling that if Lilly and the others saw me like this, they would be extremely critical of me right now. But I take my mind off that and charge forward as Mari shouts gleefully.



“OO!”

The blue crab's giant claw came swinging down.

Welf barely managed to parry the attack with his greatsword. Stumbling, he returned the blow with the massive blade. He jumped back as sparks flew from the crab's hard shell. Finally, on the third blow, the blade found a seam in the shell and slashed through the fleshy body underneath.

“Damn...!”

He wiped the sweat that had pooled beneath his neck.

This was not easy. Aisha had said that even a Level-2 adventurer could fight the monsters on this floor. She was right. If Welf put his all into it, he could unquestionably prevail.

But the fights were bitter. Killing a single monster took a lot of time and effort. In the Dungeon, where monster attacks came one on top of the next, that could be fatal. He would be cornered by the Dungeon's prime weapon—its resources—and crushed.

The experience was teaching him, painfully, the meaning of the floor standards that the Guild set.

He could not keep up with the demands of the vanguard. The number of monsters in front of the party began to increase. Welf grimaced as the group continued its attempt at escape.

“Yaaaaah!”

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“...!”

But support was what a party was all about.

A single blow from a fiercely swung blade bisected the blue crab charging Welf.

“What's wrong, smith? All tired out?”

“...Man. You look pleased with yourself as usual!”

Ouka was gripping in one hand the battle-ax that had slaughtered the crab. Welf smiled spitefully at him.

“I guess I can forgive you in light of how well you used that weapon,” the smith said.

“Yeah...This one is really saving my ass.”

Welf chugged down one of the potions he was carrying and leaped

forward toward the monsters. Ouka was at his side.

“Arrr!”

Using a martial-arts move incongruent with his hulking body—a technique he’d learned in the Far East—Ouka ripped off one flank of the blue crab directly in front of him. He followed up with a swipe of his silver ax, easily smashing the enemy’s hard shell and pulverizing its soft flesh.

The Kougou battle-ax.

Welf had forged it for Ouka using varmath, a high-quality Dungeon ore that Hephaistos had given him as part present, part assignment. It was found only in the lower levels. Welf had used the leftovers for Ouka’s shield. The heavyweight gear was exceptionally powerful, sharp, and protective.

Even though he’d gotten the materials for free, Welf made it a rule to sell whatever he could as a smith, and therefore he charged 700,000 valis for the set. That included a steep discount.

Ouka channeled his indebtedness to Welf back into fighting strength and roared with rage.

“UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!”

Blue veins popping in his powerful arms, he wielded Kougou with both hands.

His abilities were undeveloped compared to those of a second-tier adventurer, but his gear—guaranteed by Welf as equivalent to second-tier level—made up for what he lacked, allowing him to crush the monsters. Swinging the ax sideways, he sliced the crab in half horizontally so forcefully that its magic stone shattered along with the rest of it, and everything turned to ash.

The wall of monsters blocking the party’s path had thinned, and a way forward was now open.

“Amazing vanguard work! Thanks, you guys...!”

“Lady Lilly, now is our chance!”

As Daphne gave the valiant Ouka a sweat-drenched smile, Mikoto urged the party forward.

Daphne, who was concentrating on unexpected attacks from the sides, swung her baton-like dagger. While she defended Lilly and Dormul and the others in the center, Mikoto supported the vanguard.

Mikoto was single-handedly filling the gap left by Chigusa. Using her skill, she would instantly identify approaching enemies, then throw her knives at them before they reached the party.

The throwing knives, called *sakuya*, were stained crimson at the tips, as befit the meaning of their name—“red nights.” Welf had made the ninja weapons according to Mikoto’s specifications. They were forged from blood onyx, an ore found in the middle levels. Although they entailed some sacrifice in throwing distance, the weapons

handled far better than a bow and arrow. Mikoto gripped four of the throwing knives between her fingers and aimed for the eyes of approaching monsters. When the enemies faltered, Ouka and Welf rushed in to kill them using their ax and sword. Sometimes Mikoto even ran forward herself and bravely filled the gaps between the two boys.

My head is about to explode...!

Aside from Aisha, who was drawing forward the pack of monsters at the rear and then slaughtering them, Mikoto currently bore the heaviest burden of anyone in the party. She was not only providing support from the center and filling in at the vanguard, but she was also scouting out enemies. Her role of course demanded physical stamina, but her continuous use of Yatano Black Crow was also sucking away her mental energy minute by minute. Although it could be revived with items or magic, the psychological burden was heavy. Her all-around talent with various weapons and positions was precisely what made it so weighty.

Since Sir Bell isn't here right now, I have to keep pushing myself...!

As sweat poured down her body, she mentally whipped herself to fight harder with both her throwing knives and katana. Just then, Ouka and Welf started making a commotion.

What's that?!

A figure about as large as Ouka was charging toward them straight on.

Mikoto's net of perception hadn't registered it—in other words, it must be a type of monster she hadn't encountered yet.

"A crystallus urchin! All of you, clear out of here!" Aisha shouted from the rear. She knew more about this floor than the others.

The monster's ball-shaped body was covered in long, sharp needles. The blue marine species was charging toward the party by rolling at high speed. Watching it crush the crystal ground as it advanced furiously, sending up fragments, it was easy to imagine that anyone who got in its way would be similarly split into a thousand pieces.

As Mikoto watched, her violet eyes zeroed in on a hideous jaw in the center of the rounded surface. She could see a large glob of mucus hanging from the circular mouth full of countless teeth.

"Hey, Big Guy! What are you doing? Get out of the way!" Welf shouted, turning pale.

"Chigusa and the other wounded can't run! If this thing makes it to the back, someone will be caught in those needles!" Ouka replied, raising his shield.

He was right. The dwarves, weakened by the parasitic vines, could not run fast enough to escape. The same was true for the elves they

carried. But given Ouka's status, he and his varmath shield would be turned into a mincemeat pancake if he tried to take on the huge needle-covered shell head-on.

Mikoto watched Ouka drip sweat as he prepared to intercept the urchin, and her eyes narrowed.

Ah—there's something familiar about this scene!

Over three months ago, she had been protecting the injured Chigusa in the middle levels when a hard armored charged them from behind. The fight had ended with injuries on both the monster's side and theirs, and ultimately they had been in such a wretched condition that they even decided to lead a pass parade into Bell's party. If only she had been stronger then! She still regretted what had happened.

She smiled at her current difficult situation. Then she moved forward as if something was pulling her.

"Mikoto!"

She moved past the startled Ouka and leaped to the very front of the party. Returning the Iron Tiger Kotetsu to her hip, she pulled a new weapon from her back, sheath and all.

It was a new blade made by Welf, called Shunsan, meaning "Spring Hail."

The cutting edge at the sword's tip was like a flame. It was far superior to the two blades at her hip, Kotetsu and Chizan.

As Mikoto leaped out into the path of the crystallus urchin, it hurtled forward, cutting up the monsters in its way. A cloud of blood and flesh filled the air. Mikoto sped forward, her awareness sharpening as she went.

The voices of Ouka and the others behind her grew faint. Even the sound of the monster rolling toward her disappeared.

She was prepared for this. Takemikazuchi had taught her new skills. She had a fantastic new weapon from Welf. If she couldn't get through this—if she couldn't overcome the same setup she'd encountered before—then her whole life up till now would be a fiction.

—I can be like Bell, too!

The next instant, her body was on fire.

She slipped the sheath on at her hip and placed her right hand on the hilt. Taking a fighting position, she prepared to draw the sword.

Of all the moves she had learned during her ten-day training with Takemikazuchi, the one she was about to use was as powerful as the Full-Moon Throw. It was the most advanced quick-draw she knew, and her teacher, the god of combat, had ordered her to name it.

"—!!!"

The monster groaned as it rapidly narrowed the gap between them, crushing crystals as it went. The instant it was about to make

contact, Mikoto loosened her sword from its scabbard.

At just the right moment, with just the right breathing, she slid the blade out.

Takemikazuchi hadn't looked very pleased by the name she selected, but she was satisfied she had chosen well. Actually, she had based the name on the one the god had given her. In other words—

Zekka. Eternal Flower.

The flashing blade whined piercingly as it bisected the hard body of the crystallus urchin.

“Whooooooooaaaaa!!”

“N-no way!”

“She cut it right in half!!”

Welf, Ouka, and even Lilly forgot where they were and cheered as they watched Mikoto turn the monster into an enormous pile of ash. She swiftly returned Shunsan to its scabbard and raised her right hand in a fist.

“Hurry, everyone! Onward!”

Her heart still pounding with excitement, she turned to shout back at the rest of the group. The whole party—second-tier adventurers Luvis and Dormul included—was struck with admiration. They rushed down the open passage, their morale high.

“M-Miss Mikoto, you're amazing!”

“Thank you, Lady Haruhime!”

Haruhime was waiting for Mikoto when she returned to the middle rank. As the two ran desperately forward with the rest of the party, Haruhime handed Mikoto one of Nahza's new High Dual Potions. As soon as she chugged it down, her physical and mental strength were completely restored.

For a moment, Mikoto blushed under the excited gaze of Haruhime, who was serving as her supporter, but she quickly switched gears. Once again, she began using Yatano Black Crow to search for enemies.

“Three on the right, six in the water, and another one hiding behind that crystal!”

“Mr. Welf, please turn left and attack with your magic sword in four seconds!”

As Mikoto told the party where the monsters were, the information was channeled through Lilly. She made all decisions at her own discretion, having been entrusted by Daphne with commanding the group. Drawing on experience gleaned as a supporter, she assessed her companions' movements, coordination, and degree of energy and instantly filled any hole that opened.

Unsatisfied to simply sit back and command, she also provided support with her hand bow gun and magic sword. In effect, she was controlling the party as if it were an extension of her own body.

The combination of Mikoto's extraordinary ability to identify enemies and Lilly's decision-making skills saved the party from disaster numerous times. Now that the group had lost its core—Bell—these two were unmistakably steering it forward.

Then there was Cassandra.

"Miss Cassandra! Recovery, please!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

The girl was dispensing her healing magic according to decisions made by Lilly, who had the best overall grasp of battle conditions.

"Heavenly light, once rejected. Merciful arms that save my shallow self. Rescue my miserable companions in place of my words that cannot reach them."

Cassandra passed Chigusa to Haruhime and began chanting as she waved her crystal rod.

"Oh sunlight, may you beat back ruin—"

The speed and confidence with which she sang the words were evidence of her abundant experience and skill in healing her companions. She adjusted the amount of magic power she dispensed depending on the severity of her patient's wounds.

Having come to the end of the chant, she activated the magic.

"Soul light."

A magical light resembling sunlight poured down in a circle about ten meders across, with Cassandra at its center. This particular method, which allowed her to treat multiple people at once, was called area healing. All the adventurers aside from Aisha were within the sphere, basking in a healing light whose power was far greater than that of any ordinary potion.

As their wounds closed, their movements regained a remarkable alacrity. Cassandra's ability as a healer was obvious from the strength of her patients. They were fully recovered.

"I'm ready to go!"

"Thank you, Cassandra!"

"That was a bit too close for comfort, wouldn't you say, Li'l E?"

"We can't be using Cassandra's skills every other second at a time like this!!"

"Why are you arguing when I've just healed you...?" she moaned.

As Ouka and Mikoto applauded Cassandra, Welf and Lilly were back to their usual quibbling. The healer looked on the verge of tears.

The adventurers re-formed their battle line and, in a single surge, scattered the monsters blocking their way forward and once again began moving down the passage.

“You guys aren’t half-bad...I thought when we lost Bell Cranell, everything would fall apart, but I guess I didn’t know what I was talking about,” Aisha said, gazing with narrowed eyes at the strenuous efforts of the party.

They were still in a tough spot, but she let her admiration for the third-tier adventurers show as they cooperated to push through one lower-level attack after the next. At the same time, she revised her view of them.

She could use these people.

“Turn right at the next passage!” Lilly shouted. Following her order, Welf and the others found themselves leaping into a long, wide passage.

It was a straight, dry path with no stream running alongside it. Although they could see small tunnels dotting the sides, large hordes of monsters would only be able to approach from ahead or behind them. The white crystals on the ceiling cast an unusually strong light. As the group approached the center of the passage, Lilly issued another command.

“We will intercept monsters here!”

“Here?! Seems like the kind of place likely to have a lot of them!” Ouka countered.

“In this passage, they’ll only be coming from one direction! We should be able to keep them within the range of fire for our magic swords! Mr. Welf, burn them to cinders!!” Lilly screamed back, adding a command to Welf at the end.

“Ha-ha!”

Welf was overwhelmed by the ferocity of the party’s brain, whose eyes were practically popping out from the speed her mind was spinning at, but he couldn’t help chuckling. He had to admit—her plan was easy to understand. Annihilate the enemy on a single axis.

In the depths of his heart, he didn’t want to admit it, but his insanely powerful Crozzo Magic Swords were unrivaled in this situation.

As he crossed paths with Aisha, who was running up from the rear, he faced the pack of approaching monsters and swung the crimson magic sword he had drawn from his back downward.

“Kougou!”

As the sword descended from above his head, it breathed out a huge ball of fire.

The surge of heat it created surpassed even that of the magic sword he had used against the Goliath, wiping out the pack of monsters about to reach the group. The roaring of the fire drowned

their screams as a storm of sparks danced through the crystal passage.

"The heat is incredible...!" Daphne said, throwing one arm in front of her face as the swelling flames exhaled their searing breath toward her. Blazing corpses of monsters and melting magic stones buried within piles of ash lay scattered before her eyes.

But in the distance, she could see a new parade approaching.

"We may be using the terrain to our advantage, but what are we gonna do when the magic swords crumble?" Aisha asked, sweating profusely as she drank a potion.

"Whenever we run, the situation just gets worse! Even if we escape from this labyrinth, we'll somehow have to bring down the overall number of monsters or else we'll be trapped on this floor!"

Lilly desperately scanned the map as she answered Aisha, searching for a solution. As Welf's magic sword seared away the second wave of the parade, the Amazon—who had more experience as an adventurer than anyone else in the party—tossed back the rest of her potion.

"We'll just have to see how it goes."

"—"

But the situation was about to get worse.

It was Mikoto, of course, who first sensed the danger.

"Mikoto?"

"—This is bad."

She stood beside Haruhime, who was handing an item to Aisha, and scanned their surroundings with her violet eyes.

As if to affirm her murmured words, a crackling noise shot through the passageway.

"—"

Fissures raced across the crystal walls. Thousands of them, covering a huge expanse.

For Lilly, time stood still. Ouka and Daphne were struck dumb, while Cassandra froze, and Welf, in the midst of swinging his magic sword, looked up. Even the enfeebled Dormul, Luvis, and Chigusa turned pale.

These adventurers who had made their way to the lower levels knew instantly what the fissures foretold.

A monster party. Local monsters were about to emerge en masse.

This dirty trick of the Dungeon plunged the adventurers into an abyss of despair.

The fissures extended from the center of the wide passageway for about fifty meders, placing the adventurers completely within their boundaries. The Dungeon had revealed its malice and was clearly trying to murder the party.

"This is insane!" Welf shouted as he took on the approaching

parade of monsters. Even as he did, the ominous creaking and cracking of the fissures did not stop. It was as if the walls were proclaiming the number of minutes the adventurers had left to live.

"It's too huge...Can ye believe it reaches down there?"

"Shit, we've made it this far...and now...!"

Dormul and Luvis grimaced at the soul-crushing scene before them. Hopelessness crept over the faces of the other elves and dwarves, too, as they took in the incredible scale of the event.

"Well...I don't have any other choice."

Aisha alone clicked her tongue in irritation. Sweeping her bangs aside as if she was, in truth, reluctant to do what she planned, she turned to Lilly.

"Okay, shrimp, I'm gonna do this. Get ready."

"...!"

Not bothering to wait for a response from the surprised prum, Aisha walked toward Luvis and the other wounded.

"Hey, you—promise me something," she said to them.

"Huh?!"

Aisha thrust her *podao* at the elves and dwarves who lifted their faces toward her. Then she pressed its tip into the base of Luvis's throat. He blanched with shock. So did Dormul, who was propping him up with one shoulder. Aisha swept her sharp gaze over the stunned dwarves and elves behind them.

"You will never speak of what is about to happen...Do you promise me that?"

"Wh-wh-what are you talking about?! Going crazy at a time like this?!"

"A-aye! What the crikey are ye—?"

"Do. You. Promise?"

Dormul's voice broke off as Aisha jabbed the tip of her sword into Luvis's neck, tearing the skin. As a drop of blood trickled downward, the weakened pair of adventurers turned even paler.

Aisha was not joking around. As the cries of newborn monsters rang out and the labyrinth walls strained as if they were about to fly apart, her eyes glinted fiercely.

Death was confronting the party. Terror trampled Luvis's mind.

Faced with Aisha's bone-chilling gaze, the dwarf and the elf forced themselves to respond.

"I-I promise."

"I-I swear on the name of Her Majesty the queen of the elves."

"I'll hold you to that," Aisha said. As Dormul and Luvis nodded repeatedly, she withdrew her weapon. A second later, she smiled and called out.

"Okay, Haruhime—do it!"

A pair of fox ears stood up in surprise and a head of luxurious golden hair trembled.

Then the renart girl gave Aisha a nervous but resolute nod and prepared to release her magic.

“Get in a circle formation around Miss Haruhime and defend her with your lives!” Lilly shouted, looking up. Her order was simple and clear, and the others obeyed quickly.

Ouka with his shield and battle-ax, Mikoto with her sword, Daphne with her dagger, Cassandra with her short bow, and Aisha with her *podao* formed a circle around the renart. Welf leaped back, kicking the ground to join them. In the center, the girl quietly pulled her black robe low over her eyes and brought her hands together like a shrine maiden performing a ritual.

“—Here I go.”

The next instant, the Dungeon walls around them roared like an avalanche as they spawned a huge swarm of monsters.

“OO!”

The monster party had begun.

As a sword bounced off slashing claws, a shrill metallic screech echoed through the passage.

Haruhime could sense that Mikoto, her black ponytail tousled, had fended off a monster’s charge with her first blow. The renart closed her eyes and used the thread of her concentration to pull herself together. Then she unleashed the inner power that the grimoire had opened her eyes to.

“*Kokonoe.*”

Surprisingly, the new sorcery she had learned began not with a chant but with the announcement of the spell’s name.

“*Beloved snow. Beloved crimson. Beloved white light.*”

As Haruhime sang the chant, her body began to change. The magic she released turned to innumerable sparks of light that gathered around her buttocks. A sound like a bell being rolled rang out, and at the same time five tails made of light the same color as her fur sprouted from her behind.

“*Please let me be beside you—this love I have found at the end of two thousand nights.*”

Haruhime now had six tails, including the original one, all of them glittering with golden light. Her black robe absorbed the aftereffects of the magic and floated airily around her. Like the girl herself, the dwarves protected within the circle of adventurers were spellbound. Even the noble elves forgot their surroundings and stared bedazzled at this girl who resembled nothing more than a shrine

maiden chanting ritual prayers.

“Shit, we’re screwed,” Aisha murmured as the magic took effect. She had strictly forbidden Haruhime from using the spell except when she commanded it. The reason she had done this was that once its power became known, she knew an ugly struggle for the girl would occur yet again.

The other reason was that it was their ultimate trump card, the only one that had the power to single-handedly break through a deadlocked battle.

This is so hard.

Beads of sweat formed on Haruhime’s forehead. She could feel her mental strength draining away. It was as if fragments of her life were being sucked into those tails of light. It occurred to her somewhat randomly that this must be what the sacrificial shrine maidens in the Far East felt like.

“My name is Magic Fox, former destroyer. My name is Ancient Song, former dreamer. For you who beat your wings like a bird, I shall allow the nine spirits to dwell within me.”

Her throat was on fire. Her body was burning. The golden light became ferocious fangs tearing into her tender flesh as it almost set off an Ignis Fatuus.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

She could hear Mikoto fighting a monster. The roars of her companions protecting her powerless self set her heart on fire.

All Haruhime could do was sing.

And so she would sing, until her voice dried up, until her life drained away, breathing a prayer for her beloved companions. She would fulfill their spirited hopes. And she would help the boy whom she yearned for.

As her friends held back the ever-more-ferocious attacks of the monsters, Haruhime began to chant more quickly.

Mikoto gathered what little strength she had left and slashed her blade again and again and again at the onslaught of violent assaults. Welf unleashed fire from his magic sword at close range. Ouka bellowed war cries as blood ran from his wounds. Aisha’s *podao* mowed down any monster that approached her.

“Echo song of gold, sacred poem of Tamamo. White face, golden fur, king of nine tails.”

The battlefield song shook Haruhime’s self-possession, yet still she was able to continue the chant without breaking off. Squeezing her eyes shut, she sang the next line of the song of golden light.

“Oh tails of the auspicious beast, consume all, grant all wishes—”

And then:

Haruhime's new magic was called Kokonoe. The unique enchantment endowed its user with fox tails made of light, then concentrated the effects of a separate magical spell chanted directly afterward into the tails. Once this happened, Haruhime was able to activate the magic in as many iterations as there were tails, all with a single effort of will.

Like magic swords, the multiple tails acted as mediators of magic. And like the killing stones that sealed off sorcery, this spell allowed her to give level boosts to multiple people at the same time.

The elves and dwarves were in a state of confusion.

"H-heh, what's happening here?"

"They're all so strong I barely recognize them!"

"Simply put, everyone leveled up," Lilly said.

""Huh?!""

On hearing Lilly's overly straightforward explanation, the elves and dwarves rolled their eyes back in their heads, and bubbles foamed from their mouths. They were in shock over this skill that defied common sense and was illegal to boot.

The magical combination of Kokonoe and Uchide no Kozuchi created a group level boost. It was *Hestia Familia's* new trump card.

According to Haruhime's status, the maximum number of tails the spell could generate was nine. Currently, however, she was able to create only five.

She had expended a huge amount of energy, and now that she was done, her legs folded beneath her. She was at her limit, one step from total Mind Down. Still, the adventurers had reaped more than enough reward from her magic.

"Zhaaaa!"

"GAAAAAAAAA!!!"

That magic was now a thick swirl of light particles encircling Mikoto's body as she used her new power to the fullest. All five adventurers were filled with a feeling of omnipotence and excitement over the strength that poured from them. They thwarted the attacking monsters with newfound speed, force, and might, sending their enemies flying with their weapons.

They've rallied.

Aisha looked coolly at the battle under way around her. The morale of her fellow party members had skyrocketed in tandem with their abilities. They were putting up a hell of a fight against the numerous monsters that still surrounded them in a dense ring, slashing and mowing down their enemies. Through their combined efforts, they were holding back that most despair-inducing of all phenomena, the monster party.

They had withstood the Dungeon's ultimate weapon, its barrier of resources.

For a minute there I was worried...but if we can reduce their numbers a little more, we should be able to get out of here.

The absolute number of monsters on any given floor had an upper limit. On the lower levels, new monsters could be spawned at shorter intervals, but given that so many had just appeared in one area, there would probably be a lull once they got past this spot. The number of monsters they encountered would definitely drop off.

Time still remained on the party's level boost. Very soon, the scales would tip in favor of the adventurers.

Of course, that assumes that they can keep up this energy level.

Conversely, if they stumbled here, they would be in trouble.

That was why Aisha was so wary of the insanely abnormal enhanced species.

So what else have you got, huh? Overwhelming us with sheer numbers won't work, as you can see, and neither will wearing us down by setting the small fry on us. Try any more of your little tricks and we'll crush them.

Now that her status was up to Level 5, Aisha's fighting prowess was truly incredible.

From a monster's perspective, the way she took down multiple large-category enemies with a single blow of her *podao* must have been a nightmare. She quickly cleared a wide circle around the point that she was defending. She was sure she could easily slaughter the enhanced species if it were to appear right now.

As she looked around fearlessly with narrowed eyes, she finally spotted it.

There it is!

It was far in the distance, past the low-level monsters that were still throwing their weight around. The garish dark-green moss huge was paying no attention to the battle cries of the monsters or the bellows of the adventurers. It was simply roaming about the wide passage, crouching, standing, crouching, and then repeating the whole routine over again.

...? What the hell is it doing...?

Aisha stared dubiously at the enhanced species's enigmatic actions, all the while sending monsters flying with her *podao* and long legs.

Just then, it swept its eyes toward the party, as if to answer Aisha's unspoken question, from its position beyond the thinning wall of monsters.

It was gripping something in both hands...countless sparkling purplish-blue magic stones.

“__”

This Amazon who boasted the bravery of a battle-hardened soldier felt as if time had stopped. Her beautiful, long black hair trembled.

She had just realized something.

Their enemy was not trying to overwhelm them with numbers, nor to tire them out.

That ass—

It was after the masses of magic stones produced when Aisha and the others killed the monsters.

The enhanced species met Aisha's gaze and, for the first time, revealed an emotion.

It grinned.

There was no doubt about it. With mouth stretched wide and saliva hanging from its lips, it was definitely smiling.

A moment later, it stuffed the magic stones into its open mouth.

"...!!"

The instant it crunched the crystals between its teeth, the giant's body literally expanded. The pieces of moss covering it stood on end like pointed dragon scales. The armor-like wooden frame creaked as it grew larger, and thin, rootlike pieces of wood crawled down to the tips of the monster's fingers and toes. It opened its mouth into a yawning cavern, completing this transformation into a veritable evil spirit.

If its presence had been overwhelming before, it was far more so now. This monstrous figure slowly lifted its face and looked at Aisha.

Flashing its eyes—which were now a muddy red—it kicked the ground.

"...?!"

Then it charged forward, crushing the other monsters under its feet and kicking their bodies aside.

Aisha raised her *podao* as the menace bore down on her.

As the monster's enormous fist cut downward through the air, it collided with her sword.

"Oof!"

"OOOOOOOO!"

OOOO!

OO!!"

The thundering bovine bellow made her want to cover her ears. She stumbled backward.

Even with the level boost, she knew this intense power would be a heavy challenge for her. Intoxicated by its own sense of omnipotence, the enhanced species let out a roar of joy that resembled the groan of a broken music box. As it pumped its fist into the air, rootlike spikes burst out from the wooden frame.

Aisha understood now what had happened. The enhanced species had greedily devoured the magic stones of every single monster they

had slaughtered on the way here.

It had taken in the cores of dozens, or even hundreds, of monsters.

Just how far...?

Just how far would it go to undermine their predictions?

At this point, all she could do was acknowledge the trickery and monster's cunning she had underestimated before.

Drops of sweat flew from Aisha's face.

For an instant she was overtaken by hesitation and anxiety, and that instant left her vulnerable to attack.

She had been thinking that in terms of status, the odds were still in her favor. That she could still make a comeback.

At precisely that moment, the moss huge stretched its neck out like a dragon.

"...?!"

It grabbed Aisha's brown shoulder and sank its fangs into the base of her neck.

Her flesh tore, her bones shattered, and blood spurted into the air.

Lilly and Welf sensed something strange was happening and turned toward her at the same moment. What they saw left them speechless.

"—!"

Aisha glared angrily at the monster as blood spilled from her mouth.

With all her strength, she slammed her fist into her enemy's chin, pushing it away with her flesh still in its mouth. She added to its backward momentum by landing a spinning kick on it, sending it staggering away.

"M-Miss...Aisha?!"

Haruhime, who was sitting on the ground with a delirious look in her eyes, let out a piercing scream.

The enhanced species retracted its neck and fixed a piece of moss to its crushed jaw. Meanwhile Aisha panted as she pressed her left hand against the gaping hole in her shoulder. She laughed with irritation as blood gushed from the wound.

"I flunked..."

She pulled her hand back from the wound. A parasitic vine had sprouted there and was slithering across her brown skin. It was already twined around her left shoulder and arm, her midriff and hips, and her full breasts.

The sight of it sent a jolt of shock through the other adventurers. The monster had planted a seed in her when its teeth made contact with her body.

"HA-HA-HA..."

"That ugly ass—!!"

Drool hanging from its fangs, the moss huge laughed mockingly at the sight of its offspring parasitizing the Amazon's body. Then it mercilessly bore down for another attack.

Aisha fought back, a sickly sweat covering her body.

“—Get off!” Welf shouted.

He had left his post to run to her side. Raising his magic sword, he set his sights on both the enhanced species and the other monsters surrounding Aisha.

“Kouga!”

“—!!”

For the fourth time that day, a massive explosion of flames swirled through the passage. Aisha leaped back, watching as monsters danced in torment within the crimson flames. But as they roared a chorus of death cries...she made out the figure of a giant standing calmly among them, arms crossed over its chest.

“Huh?!” Welf said, watching in astonishment.

“It's resisting Mr. Welf's magic sword!” Lilly yelled.

The enhanced species slowly raised its head as burning moss peeled off its body. As the moss fell to the ground, a shiny blue material came into view underneath.

“Could that be...Undine cloth?!” Lilly asked.

“Don't tell me it took it off a dead adventurer!” Welf muttered.

Mikoto, Ouka, Daphne, and Cassandra could not believe their eyes, either. The cloth was stretched to the point of tearing in order to wrap around the huge body, but there was no doubt about it—it was spirit protective cloth. As Welf had guessed, the monster had fixated on the need to address its single weak point—fire—and had stolen the cloth from the corpses of adventurers.

“Of all the lousy coincidences...!”

Welf drew his eyebrows together as he looked at the monster's garment. A family that carried the blood of a spirit in its ancestral line made Crozzo Magic Swords. They were, in other words, spirit magic swords. A spirit was involved with the protective cloth, as well. The energy of the two spirits coming together seemed to have set off an extreme reaction.

Furthermore, Kouga belonged to the flame class of magic swords. It carried the power of salamander, the fire spirit. Undine cloth, on the other hand, was imbued with the power of water. Their compatibility was extremely poor, and they had canceled each other out.

Nevertheless, the enhanced species' body had been burned somewhat. Welf was just thinking of giving the sword another try when a fissure cracked down its blade.

“Shit...!”

The next instant, the crimson sword crumbled with a high-pitched

shattering sound.

The magic blade had reached the end of its life span, the result of its heavy use against the parade of monsters. Not only Welf but Lilly, too, stared in shock as the fragments of sword pattered onto the ground.

“—AAA!!”

As if to inundate them with still more bad news, the final parade of monsters arrived in the passage.

The flush drained from Mikoto’s face, which was spattered with blood—both her own and her enemies’.

“OOOOO!”

“Huh?”

The enhanced species was ignoring Welf and the others and instead tenaciously going after Aisha. It had recognized her strength and determined that if she fell, the other adventurers would, too. As if spurred on by the appearance of this lone evil warrior, the other monsters rallied their strength and raged madly. Together with the newly arrived ranks, they set their sights on Mikoto and the rest of the party.

“This is not good!!”

“I can’t hold out...!”

Gripping their shields, Daphne and Ouka shrieked as the monsters narrowed the circle around them with a powerful surge.

The counterattacks from Mikoto’s katana and Welf’s greatsword were a drop in the bucket. Cassandra threw aside her weapon and tried to hold the line by using her healing magic, but as soon as she managed to close one wound, another was opened on top of it.

The mass of light particles that had given them their level boosts swayed as if they, too, were groaning.

“Oh no...!”

The color drained from Lilly’s face as she watched the circle of adventurers who were protecting her being steadily pressed inward.

Even when she wielded the lightning magic sword in her trembling hands, the monsters did not disappear. Soon they would fill the entire passageway. Aisha had disappeared beyond the fence of monsters, so they could no longer count on her help. To the contrary—with the parasitic vines covering her body, Aisha was on the verge of being trampled by the enhanced species.

Lilly had misread it.

She had gone and misread everything.

The irregularity of the enhanced species. The threats of the lower levels. The unfathomable depths of the Dungeon.

She had made a poor decision as a leader.

She lacked experience, and at the very last moment, she had made

a mistake.

Lilly had not been able to transform herself into Braver.

“Lend me yer ax...!”

“Uh...M-Mr. Dormul?”

“Even without my arm, I can at least serve as a shield!”

“A-and Mr. Luvis, too...It’s impossible! You can’t!”

Dormul had stood up beside the dazed Lilly, and Luvis had followed his lead. They wanted to borrow equipment and stand alongside Welf and the others in the protective circle. Both ignored Lilly’s protest. They had no chance of winning, but still they wanted to fight stubbornly like adventurers until the end.

“Uh, um...!!”

It was no good. Everyone had lost their cool.

Everyone was fighting like they were going to die here.

Lilly could not blow away the heavy scent of death that lingered all around her.

The mask of the leader fell from her face, and a film of tears formed in the eyes that had been putting on such a resolute act from the start of the expedition.

“Use us as decoys and escape if ye can!” Dormul shouted with grim determination.

“Someone has to tell everyone on the surface about this monster...! As many of us as possible must survive...!” Luvis added.

Haruhime, who was still sitting on the ground, gulped. Lilly’s wide eyes wavered.

“Leave us here...*Hestia Familia*!”

In response to Dormul’s words, Lilly’s true nature—the nature of the filthy girl who had groveled in the dirt and slurped muddy water—slowly raised its head.

From the perspective of the leader, there was no more logical argument. She hoisted it like a shield, a dark smile on her lips, eager to spring at this option. After all, what choice did she have? She had come this far, and she did not want to die. She did not want to give up even one extra moment of life. Yes indeed, they should leave the wounded behind!

Her heart beat erratically. She could not breathe. Thoughts and emotions swirled dizzily within her.

Now! Now! Now!

Don’t hesitate! Say it! Make your decision!

The realist in Lilly was screaming at her, insisting she was in the right.

The girl of the filth was shouting that this was how she had stayed alive so far. Why hesitate now?

Her small lips trembled. Her tangled tongue tried to speak.

But then, the other Lilly, the one who was pressing on her heart, tearfully pleaded with the pure-white expanse that her mind had become.

Save them.

“...!!”

Lilly's left hand flashed.

A lightning bolt from her magic sword shot between the elf and the dwarf, slaughtering the monster that had just flown at them.

Dormul and Luvis stared at her, dumbfounded. Finally, she spoke.

“If he were here, he wouldn't leave you behind!”

Another image from the Dungeon rose before her mind's eye.

A beautiful, warm Firebolt that had saved her when she was surrounded by a terrifying swarm of giant ants, and the extended hand of a boy.

“He didn't leave me behind!” she howled, tears flying from the corners of her eyes.

Lilly hadn't become Braver. At the very last moment, she had kicked away the best option. Human emotion and sympathy had swayed her.

In a corner of her mind, the image of Finn sighed disappointedly.

But no. Lilly didn't want to become Braver. What she really wanted to become—what she wanted to pursue—was the person who had saved her.

The kind hand that had not abandoned her when she was smeared with mud.

“I can do it, too...! Lilly can change, too!!”

Bell had had many experiences, and he had set his eyes on a distant goal, and he had changed.

If that was true, then it would be a lie to say Lilly couldn't change. It would be a lie to say she couldn't take off running, too.

If she didn't, then she had no right to stand by his side.

“That's why I won't! I won't leave you behind! Do not give up!”

Her hands and feet were shaking. Emotions were flooding her whole being. Although her small body was easily blown back by the cruel howls of the monsters, still she transformed her tearful voice into resolution. As Luvis and Dormul watched her, the shadow of death faded from their faces.

A single tear slid from the moist chestnut-brown eyes.

“I did it because I'm his supporter!!”

Welf's ears caught her words and his sweat-drenched face formed a smile.

Just then, the exhausted Haruhime perked up her ears.

“—!!”

She widened her green eyes, bit her lip, and with her last drop of

strength, reached out one arm.

“Lady Lilly...!”

Lilly turned in surprise as Haruhime grasped her Undine cloth sleeve.

“He’s coming...!”

“Huh?”

“He will arrive...!”

The animal girl had picked up a voice in the midst of the chaotic battle. She smiled, her face full of envy and encouragement.

“That person is coming...!”

The next moment...

“Lillyyy!!”

Bell’s voice reached Lilly’s ears as he shouted her name.

“—”

He was approaching from far, far away. At the very limit of her field of vision, way down at the other end of the wide passage, she could see him waving his arms.

It was exactly like the day he had saved her from the horrible swarm of ants.

The other Lilly, the one who had groveled in the dirt covered in filth, slapped her hand on the ground. She gritted her teeth, peeled her body from the dirt, and stood up.

Her chest grew hot, her tear glands burst open, and soon countless drops were dripping from her cheeks.

“...! Miss Haruhime, please get out of the way!!”

At that moment, Lilly guessed the intentions of the boy who was calling her name.

She moved in response to what she knew this boy, who believed in himself and made light fly from his right hand, wanted her to do. Using her quick wits, she thrust the magic sword into the ground by her feet, causing an explosion. The powerful lightning bolt carved a crater in the crystal floor.

“Quick, everyone, get into the hole! Hurry!!”

The adventurers encircling her responded to her urgent cry unquestioningly. Dormul and Luvis followed. They immediately abandoned their combat, grabbed Haruhime and the wounded, and flew into the hole.

Without skipping a beat, the horde of monsters closed in.

“Miss Aisha, run!” Lilly shouted as she shrugged off the Goliath Robe and spread it over the top of the hole.

“...!”

Aisha, still locked in battle with the enhanced species, stared in

surprise.

The monster could not understand Lilly's words. For it, they were simply the screams of a human. And this was what decided their respective fates.

The Amazon forcefully beat back the giant's attack and dove into a tunnel just big enough to hold her.

No sooner had she done so than Bell appeared on the battleground, bell ringing, launched himself off the ground with a powerful stomp, and thrust out his right arm.

He had been charging for four minutes, a full charge.

He aimed for everything he could see and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"FIREBOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOLT!!"

A giant bolt of flame.

"—"

As soon as the Amazon disappeared from its field of vision, the enhanced species saw the burning red jaws.

The other monsters had pounced on the hole and sunk their claws into the black robe, only to be incinerated in the next moment by the Firebolt.

The deadly stream of fire that washed down the passageway swallowed the entire horde.

"O—OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

As the burning monsters howled, the enhanced species—which had also been swallowed up in the surge of flames—was thrown far down the passage with a force like a river overflowing its banks. It had avoided immolation thanks to the spirit protective cloth, but together with the rush of crimson fire, it was hurled against the wall at the end of the passage.



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The crystal wall exploded into fragments, and the horizontal column of flame raged on through the Dungeon.

The enhanced species was burned all over its body. It fell through the broken wall into the large room on the other side, and it collapsed onto its back.



“...Mr....Bell!”

Lilly pushed back the Goliath Robe covering the hole, stuck her face into the passage, and called his name like she had once before.

She could see him there, farther down the passage that was cleared now of monsters and steaming with the heat from countless melted magic stones.

A lone boy, walking through the shimmering haze left by the flames.

To her, that figure walking quietly through the swirls of sparks looked incredibly heroic.

Lilly trembled as she watched him. Even Welf and the others who poked their faces up gasped.

Lilly wanted to fly from the hole and throw herself at him. She wanted to hug him, sobbing, and inundate him with a chaotic mess of apology and gratitude.

But the flame of the warrior was still burning in his eyes.

He was looking straight ahead, his whole body aflame with outrage and determination to slaughter his powerful enemy.

In that case, there was one thing Lilly could do. She rolled out of the hole, withdrew a glass vial from the pouch at her hip, and handed it to him roughly.

“Mr. Bell!”

“—Thank you.”

That was all he said after taking the High Dual Potion, one of Nahza’s new concoctions, from her hand. But it was enough.

Aisha emerged from her tunnel, walked past the hole where Mikoto and the others lay piled on top of one another, and smiled at Bell’s back.

“...Bell Cranell! Finish that thing off before we all drop dead!” she said.

“Sorry about this, Bell, but we’re counting on you!” Welf added, a rueful smile on his face as he crawled out of the crater.

Bell did not turn toward them, replying only by raising one hand.

He drank down the last drops of the High Dual Potion, wiped the corner of his mouth with his arm, and walked toward the hole in the Dungeon wall.



He was insane with anger.

What was this?

What had just happened?

It should have been the perfect hunt. After he finished off the brown female, he was going to kill the other humans, and then eat their magic stones. But—

Why is that human alive?!

I thought you fell over the waterfall!

Why didn't you die?

Why? Why? Why?

This was the first time anything like this had happened.

There was no way he could allow something like this.

It was unacceptable for a human to exist who did not follow his expectations as a hunter.

They were just prey, just food. Nothing more.

Fury and loathing rose like smoke from his body.

The blue cloth rubbing against his skin strained and screeched at its overuse.

He gnashed his fangs and stood up.

“UOOOO...!”

If you're coming, then come. I've eaten enough magic stones.

He was different from what he had been a short while before. His power had swelled to incredible heights. It would be easy to twist and crush that human's skinny arm.

Fire could no longer affect him. Perhaps he should drag the human underwater again.

The Dungeon was his mother. Within his mother's womb, he could gain endless strength. But the humans had no tricks for gaining strength. This time, he would stop his prey's breath at the source.

His eyes gleaming with the desire to kill, he glared at the boy who appeared from beyond the hole.



Bell stood on the rim of the hole he had blasted open with the

Firebolt, looking down on the scene before him.

It was a peaceful, watery room. Water covered more than half the large space, and in the center there was a mass of crystal fifty meters in diameter. It looked like an island floating in a large lake. He did not see any monsters. None, that is, except the enhanced species that stood in the center of the island, taking him in with a gaze full of murderous intent.

Bell leaped down from the rim and jumped across the lake, using the crystals that protruded from the water's surface as stepping-stones, until he reached the island where the monster waited. Nothing stood between them now. On the flat, sparkling blue ground, beneath the light from the white crystals studding the ceiling, Bell and the enhanced species faced each other.

"GRRRRRR...!!"

Bell's eyes met those of his opponent as it let out a deep growl. It was quite a bit larger now. Standing before the grotesque giant, the emotion that the adventurer felt in his heart was almost certainly rage. This monster had hurt his friends and killed many of his fellow adventurers. It had cruelly tormented the elves. Bell was not the kind of fool who could stand by silently as this creature sadistically and calculatingly rampaged through the Dungeon to satisfy its own greed.

But he also knew that from the monster's perspective, his rage was absurd. Wounds and even life itself were the price of adventure. Everything was done at the adventurer's own risk. It was a mistake to see this fight as revenge for Luvis's arm. Bell and his party were intruders trampling destructively through the Dungeon. They were the invaders.

Bell understood this, and he gazed at the enemy before him through adventurer's eyes. He would obey the laws of the Dungeon—and kill the monster he now faced.

"..."

"HAA..."

Bell silently drew both of his knives.

The red-eyed monster exhaled a murderous breath.

An instant later, their bodies quivered and they kicked the ground.

Bell and the enhanced species charged at each other, shattering the silence of the room and transforming the little island into a fighting ring.

"Oof!"

"OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

The monster had the upper hand in their first collision. Its power had grown beyond what Bell expected, and its arm sent the thrust of his blade flying backward. To avoid the monster's pursuit, he rolled

over the ground and kicked its flank.

The moss huge flew at him again, its teeth bared precisely as if it were smiling. Bell fought back.

“Here they go...!”

Hearing the battle cries, Lilly and the others raced to the hole in the wall.

Welf panted, Ouka held Chigusa in his arms, Mikoto supported Haruhime with her shoulder, and Aisha stood with the parasitic vines twined around her body. Even Luvis, Dormul, and the other dwarves and elves pushed through their pain and gathered by the hole to watch as the fight began.

“Hey, you guys! Are you just going to stand there and not help?” Daphne panted as she ran to catch up with the others watching the fierce battle. Her opinion, delivered with extreme frankness, was that in the current situation, they would together be able to give the monster a good beating.

“Bad idea. If you get hit by those seeds and implanted with vines, you’ll just be a burden on Bell Cranell,” Aisha countered. Daphne flinched for a moment at the sight of the Amazon hugging the vine-covered half of her body, but then renewed her argument.

“B-but...we can use arrows, and maybe we could get another level boost! Rabbit Foot shouldn’t have to take on that monster all alone —!”

Cassandra interrupted her, pointing toward the room.

“D-Daphne...look...”

Daphne glanced suspiciously back at the fight.

“OOOOOOAAA!!”

“...!”

Bell had managed to get his knife past the monster’s arm and was now slashing its body relentlessly. Taking advantage of his small size in relation to his opponent, he hopped from its left side to its right, then bent forward almost to the ground and slipped around to its back side. He was unleashing a series of close-range attacks—not so much hit-and-run as rush, dodge, and repeat.

The flashing purple-blue and white blades pounded against the monster, chipping away at its wooden armor frame and mossy flesh.

“D-did that monster get stronger by eating magic stones?!” Daphne blurted out.

“I think so. But more than that...”

Aisha narrowed her eyes.

“...Isn’t Bell Cranell moving faster than the last time we saw him?” Ouka said from beside her, lowering his voice in terror. In his arms, Chigusa opened her eyes a tiny bit in surprise.

Only Mikoto, standing next to the group, broke into a cold sweat.

No way...

There was something familiar about the feeling that came over her as she registered the difference between Bell now and Bell when he was last with the party.

It wasn't that he was moving faster. It was that his movements had much more vitality to them now.

Kind of like when Haruhime gives us the level boosts...

Mikoto cleared her throat, conscious of the weight of the renart on her shoulder.

When Mikoto received level boosts, she often felt like her body was out of control. Her mind was not able to keep up with the suddenly increased power emanating from her physical body.

What if Bell had been in the same situation before he separated from the group?

What if his mind and body had been out of sync?

That happened when the drastic physical changes that occurred when one leveled up outpaced the sensations produced by the mind.

A shiver ran down Mikoto's spine.

So all this time, Sir Bell has been—

Probably, first-tier adventurers were able to bring their mind and body into sync after one major battle. But Bell was still immature—and more importantly, his rate of growth was insanely fast. Even more so than an ordinary person, his mind couldn't keep up with his body.

But what if his experience in the lower levels had finally taken care of the problem?

Mikoto's violet eyes widened as she watched the boy toss his opponent about between his knives. She thought back to something Takemikazuchi had said when he was training her before the expedition.

Were you fighting with your body and your mind out of sync?

Mikoto was right.

My body is working better than before.

Bell realized it in the midst of fighting the monster. His body was following the exact track his mind laid down. The lags in his attacks, defense, and retreat—so small before that he wouldn't even notice them without a conscious effort—were gone now.

The sensations inside his body were clearer than ever before.

That uneasy feeling is gone.

Strangely enough, the grand battle with the iguaçu—those creatures who put their very lives at risk to dive-bomb him—had brought his mind and body into alignment.

Now that his body was fully under his control, it seemed obvious. He could see just how much the vessel of his physical being had been

throwing him around, even when he first arrived in the lower levels and even during his first fight with the enhanced species.

Now his body was working how he wanted it to, as if all the gears had finally clicked into place. He was able to meet his opponent's movements.

“OO, OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

He could see the uneasiness rising in the enhanced species' eyes as it took in this new Bell, who fought in a completely different way than he had in their last encounter.

The superhuman strength that crushed the crystal ground underfoot didn't even make a scratch on the boy. The tree roots, which extended from the monster's legs into the ground and then up again for a sneak attack, were severed before they could do their work. The attacks that had tormented so many adventurers in the past had no effect.

The monster roared, as if to chase away its uneasiness. Then bumps rose all over its body. Facing Bell at close range, it fired a hail of seed bullets at him.

They're not as fast as the iguaçu!!

Bell did not lose his composure. Compared to the terrifying crimson streaks he had encountered earlier, the seed bullets looked practically stationary.

He tracked their trajectories, and moving his arms so fast they appeared to blur, he slashed down every last one with his knives.

“...!!”

The astonished monster had no time to regain its footing before Bell launched into a powerful slashing attack.

“GUO?!”

In response, the moss huge unleashed a counterattack fueled by its fighting spirit and superhuman strength. Blows nourished by the lives of countless of his own brethren rocked the scratched dir-adamantite armor covering Bell's body. This time they inflicted real harm.

The monster was the stronger of the two, and it had greater defensive abilities.

In all likelihood, Bell could not match its overall potential.

But Bell was faster.

Now that his mind and body were fully linked, his true ability gave him an advantage on the battlefield.

Even more importantly—

He's slow!

The enemy standing before him was incredibly sluggish.

Bell had a standard to hold this monster to.

A monster that was truly beyond the realm of the ordinary.

A monster that was far faster, far stronger, and far crazier than the

one before him.

Bell had fought that monster. And he had vowed to fight that worthy opponent again.

I want to beat him.

He wanted to beat the warrior who had appeared before him even after being reborn.

I want to beat him.

He wanted to beat the warrior who had battered him with his ferocious strength and his double-edged ax, Labrys.

This time, I want to win!

He wanted to beat the brave minotaur who had carved defeat into his body on that moonlit night.

His status burned high.

The fierce struggle with the moss huge had ignited the passion deep within Bell, and now, as he thought about the black minotaur, it exploded to the surface.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

“...!!”

The extreme-speed slashing attack far outstripped his enemy’s ability to respond. It was a Rabbit Rush.

Like he had with the iguaçu, Bell carved a whirlwind of black and sparkling white arcs in the air. Both his mind and body sped up. A typhoon of moss flew from the enhanced species’ body.

Finally, a horizontal slash inflicted from directly next to him sent the massive body flying backward. Now a good distance separated Bell and the moss huge.

“AAAAAAAAAAAA...!!”

“...!”

But even as pieces of the monster’s body continued to peel away, new moss grew to fill the wounds. Soon it appeared the Rabbit Rush had never even happened. Bell gaped.

Its recovery speed was extremely fast. Even when it was shredded to pieces, the living moss immediately began to regrow. A simple superiority in the number of wounds inflicted would not be enough to take down this monster that had consumed so many magic stones. With the Undine cloth wrapped around its body, Firebolts clearly wouldn’t do much, either.

Plus, even though Bell had drunk the High Dual Potion, his whole body was still feeling the aftermath of the recent full charge. If the battle lasted very long, the balance would probably tip in the monster’s favor.

So neither knife attacks nor magic would work, and a drawn-out battle would put Bell at a serious disadvantage.

In that case—a single blow was the only option.

Bell would take out his enemy with the strongest single blow he could manage, one that left no room for recovery.

He slipped Hakugen into its sheath and held the Hestia Knife in his right fist with a backhand grip. He raised it to chest level, then thrust out his left hand.

“Firebolt!”

The column of electrical fire that required no chant to activate was instantly released.

But Bell was not aiming it at the enemy in front of him. Instead, he channeled it into the jet-black blade of the knife in his right hand.

“...?!”

Neither the monster nor the adventurers watching from outside the room could believe their eyes.

Bell’s actions did not end with his infusion of magic into the blade. As soon as the magic was released, he started charging.

“—”

Ring, ring.

The chime vibrated in the giant’s ears. Its eyes fixed on something.

The Firebolt, which should have sent masses of sparks flying when it exploded into the knife and whose mass of flame should have dispersed, was instead being pressed onto the blade of the knife by the particles of white light that the boy was releasing.

No, not pressed—*focused*.

“The flames are gathering in the knife...”

“An enchantment...? No, I don’t think so...What is that?!”

Even from their position at a distance, Ouka and Daphne could see what was happening. The crimson lightning was converging and condensing. The knife wore a blazing armor of flames, which in turn was wrapped in a thick gauze of light particles.

The hieroglyphs etched into the knife pulsed with white light as if they were resonating with the flames.

It was a dual charge.

Bell’s investigations had led him to home in on the focusing property of Argonaut, and he’d used that to develop a new application of the skill. In other words, he’d figured out how to charge his magic and his knife attacks at the same time.

By exploding a Firebolt into the blade and then encasing the whole thing in light particles, he was able to infuse it with two mechanisms of attack, and at the same time to strengthen it.

As the heat of the flames focused on the blade, the Hestia Knife began to expand. The blade swelled to the width of a sword and the length of a dagger. It became hotter and brighter in proportion to the

length of the charge, until crimson light filled the entire cavernous room. In the midst of this huge power output, a few flames escaped from Bell's focus and danced off the knife in the form of sparks.

The blow he was preparing pushed his power to its limits and seemed certain to thunder with the sound of fire and decimate everything around it once it was released.

Bell had devised a completely absurd force-based combat technique. This deadly blow was expressly designed to defeat his greatest rival whenever they next met.

Yes. It was just like the eternal divine flame—

“—Goddess, I receive this from you.”

Bell raised the flame-and-light-clad knife in his right hand and looked at the monster standing before him.

Ring, ring.

As if to announce that the monster's time was up, Bell's chime rang out.



He was shaking.

What was that?

What *was* that?!

What could that be?!

He didn't know. He had never seen anything like it.

Many times in the past, he had heard songs followed by bombardment. He had been burned by fire and frozen stiff by ice, struck by lightning and stripped of parts of his body.

But he had never seen anything like this.

Never this merciless light.

Never this flash of light and flame that seemed destined to destroy all and return all to ash.

He was utterly petrified. So petrified that his will to kill and his hatred evaporated.

Water!

He had to get into the water!

If he was in the water, the human wouldn't be able to pursue him!

He turned away from the boy.

He left his anger and his pride and his humiliation behind him and was about to dive into the stream that his mother the Dungeon had provided for him.

“Hiyo!”

But before he could reach it, a blizzard of pure-white snow beat

world, something occurred to him.

If I'm reborn...

I'll never, ever go near a white rabbit again.

That was his final thought before his consciousness exploded into a million pieces.



“Argo Vesta.”

There was a thundering of flame and a flash of light, and then a tremendous shock.

That was all there was to the blow.

“—O, OO!!”

The exploding ball of flames swallowed up the death cries sputtering from the monster, and the crimson flash edged in white light flickered.

The flaming knife blow had caused the powerful explosion.

As Lilly and the others watched from above, their field of vision was filled first with white, then with red light. They threw their arms in front of their faces as the wave of heat and shock rolled toward them. Born in the space of an instant, the knife attack infused with electrical fire had generated a flare that incinerated all that it passed.

As color returned to the flickering landscape, the adventurers slowly raised their faces.

Two massive legs stood in the silent room, the upper body that once belonged to them now gone. A moment later, the legs, too, turned to ash and scattered into the air with a puff.

Bell stood with his right arm outstretched at the end of its swing, quietly looking down at his knife as he released the tension from his body. The divine blade had matured along with him, and it was as smooth and un-chipped as before the attack. The flame and light still lingering in it turned to smoke and drifted upward toward the ceiling.



"U000

“Chigusa!”

All at once, the parasitic vines entangling the adventurers' bodies disappeared.

The elves and dwarves, too, cried tears of joy as the monster's wretched torment disappeared from their bodies.

“Bell!”

The sound was coming from behind Bell, on the opposite side from the frozen stream.

Surprised, Bell turned in the direction of the splash and smiled faintly.

A beautiful mermaid had popped her head and shoulders out of the water.

It was Mari, who had parted ways with Bell just before he saved the party.

The Xenos had delivered the boy to his companions, and now she blushed and smiled broadly. Then she touched her fingers to her petite lips like a precocious child and blew Bell a farewell kiss. As she waved, her lips silently formed the words *See you later*.

Only Bell could see her; she was hidden from view of the rest of the party. The boy smiled wryly and returned her wave with a tiny one of his own.

A moment later, the sound of Bell's companions throwing their arms around him rang out, and a fishtail splashed the surface of the

water.

As the voices of the adventurers chatting excitedly on land drifted toward her in a soft, gentle murmur, the mermaid smiled faintly and returned to the world of water.

EPILOGUE GALE WIND'S NEWS



© Suzuhito Yasuda

EPILOGUE

GALE WIND'S NEWS

After defeating the enhanced species, our party left the lower levels together with Dormul, Luvis, and their companions.

We had suffered major damage and loss of our supplies, and therefore we took the shortest route to the Colossal Tree Labyrinth without making a single detour. From there we returned to the safety point of Rivira. The town's residents made no fuss whatsoever over the armless Luvis and the other injured party members, as if seeing adventurers with irreparable injuries was just a part of daily life. We requested and received accommodation to treat the wounded here.

One full day has passed since my battle with the enhanced species.

"Are you...all right...?"

Our party has come to the inn to check on Luvis and the other wounded, who we've heard have made it past the most dangerous stage of their treatment.

"Sorry to worry you! It's nothing life-threatening," Luvis says, sitting up in bed. I can tell he is still exhausted, but he gives me a hearty smile. He's sharing a large room built into a cave with a number of other adventurers, including other elves from *Modi Familia* and dwarves from *Magni Familia*, which Dormul belongs to. They're all resting on beds or sheets spread on the floor. A boundary line has been drawn down the center of the room—evidence of the usual bad relations between the dwarves and the elves.

"Thank ye kindly. Yer kindness has warmed me heart and, well... yo-ho-ho-!"

Dormul blushes and bursts into laughter as he looks at Cassandra and Haruhime.

"I'm so glad you're doing better," the healer says.

"Are the other dwarves recovering all right?" Haruhime asks.

I glance over at Luvis, who has already changed into a spare set of battle clothes. No arm protrudes from the cuff of the short sleeve on the right side.

"I'm sorry we weren't able to fix your arm..." I say.

As I had feared, there was no way to restore it. The severed limb

that we recovered was already beginning to rot, and if we had attached it, it would probably have caused necrosis from the shoulder down. No healing item or magic has the power to reverse time and undo decay.

I was worried my apology might have sounded arrogant, but Luvis answers, “No, I was lucky.”

“Huh?” I say.

He brings his left hand to his right stump and shakes his head.

“I lost an arm, not my life.”

“...Mr. Luvis.”

“Don’t worry about me. This all happened because of my own carelessness.”

I follow Luvis’s eyes and see that several other bandaged elves are smiling, too. One female elf is missing a leg. I don’t know what to say.

“This is an adventurer’s life. This is the Dungeon,” Luvis says, drawing his thin eyebrows together.

“This is the price we pay in our quest for the unknown. It’s a reality we all must face.”

Like he says, the reality of being an adventurer is right here before my eyes. It’s not at all like a splendid fairy tale. It’s the hard truth of losing an arm or an eye or even your life.

Still—continuing the fight as long as you have your life is part of being an adventurer.

Seeing Luvis’s sudden smile helps me realize that.

“When we get back to the surface, I’ll go see *Dian Cecht Familia* and get them to make me the best prosthetic arm out there...Oh boy, it’ll drive our patron deity wild to hear we’re going into debt over that!”

Maybe because he’s imagining the moment he reveals the news, Luvis giggles. It’s a pleasant laugh, not in the least shadowed by bitterness.

The graceful elven youth looks up at me.

“Rabbit Foot...Bell Cranell. Thank you for rescuing us. I swear on the name of Luvis Lilix that one day I will repay this enormous debt... My deepest gratitude, comrade of the elves.”

He puts his hand on his chest and bows deeply. The other elves do the same, with smiles on their faces.

“...Hmph! Ye elves are too formal. Ye ought to do things more simply.”

Dormul, who had been watching my exchange with Luvis silently, approaches me with his companions.

“Thank ye, *Hestia Familia* and other adventurers. If ye find trouble in the future, we dwarves will help.”

We grin at each other, and then I grasp the massive hand Dormul

has extended. Lilly, Welf, and the others shake hands with the other dwarves.

“Enough with these boring formalities! We’ve gotten through the worst; now I say it’s time for a few drinks!”

“M-Miss Aisha? What in the world are you talking about...?” Haruhime gasps.

“Thanks to that lumbering giant, our plans got all messed up and we had to give up the expedition halfway through. The least we can do is enjoy ourselves now!” Aisha answers smugly. The dwarves’ eyes sparkle at her suggestion, while the elves look astonished.

“Getting wounded people drunk, eh, Amazon?”

“We’re in!”

“Right, then, it’s a drinking party! We’ll drink this town dry!” Aisha says.

“Miss Aisha, this is absolutely not acceptable! The exorbitant prices of drinks in Rivira will be our ruin! At least wait until we’re back on the surface...!” Lilly shrieks.

“Stop being so stingy, Lilly! After all, we did bring back plenty of jewels from the lower levels!” Welf says.

“That’s a separate issue!! You think I’m going to let you waste my jewels on drinks?!”

“Back to the same old nonsense...” Daphne sighs, recalling a similar scene from the first day of the expedition. Cassandra laughs hollowly.

I smile wryly and sneak out of the large room. Maybe part of me wants to avoid getting pulled into the celebration, but mostly it’s that I want to tell the townsfolk who helped us out that Luvis and the others are on the mend.

Outside the cave-turned-inn, the eighteenth floor is bustling with midday activity. The chrysanthemum-like crystals on the ceiling are glowing with a soft sunlike light.

“Hey, Rabbit Foot! I heard you met up with quite the monster down there! Bad luck for your first expedition, I’d say!”

Bors, the head of Rivira, buttonholes me as soon as I step out of the inn. A smile on his unseemly face and a patch over one eye, he pounds me on the shoulder. His odd charm makes me smile back at his straightforward words in spite of myself.

“Tell me the whole story! I’ll pay for the drinks if you get the snacks,” he says.

“Uh, well, how about having a party with everyone, then...?”

“Right! Leave it to me!”

I make the suggestion thinking Aisha and the others will appreciate it, but just then we’re interrupted.

“Bors! Bors!”

An animal-person adventurer runs up to us.

“What’s all the fuss about?”

“...der.”

“What?”

“A murder! An adventurer has been killed outside of town!”

Both Bors and I stare in shock at the bearer of this news.

“Wait now, are you sure this isn’t the work of a monster?”

“No, a human! I saw the criminal!”

As the extremely upset animal person describes what they saw, I can’t hide my own distress.

Once again, death is close to me...A shiver runs down my neck, the blood drains from my face, and my stomach churns with an awful sound.

“Who is it you say you saw?” Bors asks, narrowing his eyes sharply.

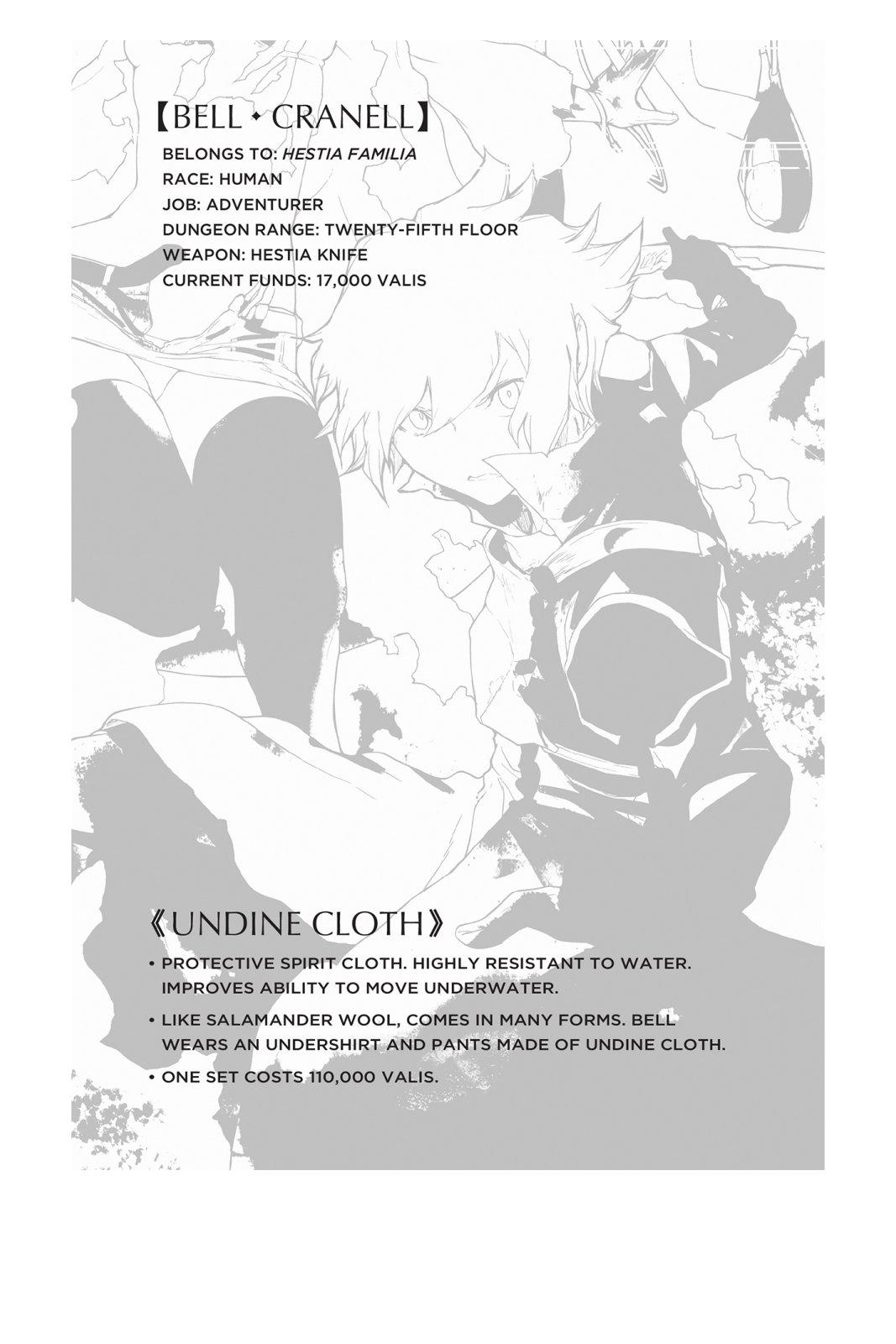
The animal person hesitates for a minute, then goes white and speaks.

“Gale Wind...”

Huh?

I stand there like a statue, not comprehending what I just heard. The townsperson continues in a loud voice.

“It was the work of that blacklisted adventurer with a bounty on her head...Gale Wind!”



【BELL • CRANELL】

BELONGS TO: *HESTIA FAMILIA*

RACE: HUMAN

JOB: ADVENTURER

DUNGEON RANGE: TWENTY-FIFTH FLOOR

WEAPON: HESTIA KNIFE

CURRENT FUNDS: 17,000 VALIS

《UNDINE CLOTH》

- PROTECTIVE SPIRIT CLOTH. HIGHLY RESISTANT TO WATER. IMPROVES ABILITY TO MOVE UNDERWATER.
- LIKE SALAMANDER WOOL, COMES IN MANY FORMS. BELL WEARS AN UNDERSHIRT AND PANTS MADE OF UNDINE CLOTH.
- ONE SET COSTS 110,000 VALIS.

STATUS

Lv. **4**

STRENGTH: IO DEFENSE: IO DEXTERITY: IO AGILITY: IO
MAGIC: IO LUCK: G IMMUNITY: H ESCAPE: I

《MAGIC》

【FIREBOLT】

- SWIFT-STRIKE MAGIC

《SKILL》

【LIARIS FREESE】

- RAPID GROWTH
- CONTINUED DESIRE RESULTS IN CONTINUED GROWTH
- STRONGER DESIRE RESULTS IN STRONGER GROWTH

【ARGONAUT】

- CHARGES AUTOMATICALLY WITH ACTIVE ACTION

【OX SLAYER】

- ALL ABILITIES DRASTICALLY ENHANCED WHEN FIGHTING MINOTAURS

《HAKUGEN》

- MADE BY WELF AS PART OF HIS THIRD WEAPON SERIES.
- A SPARKLING WHITE LONG KNIFE. THE BLADE MEASURES THIRTY-FIVE CELCH.
- LIGHTER THAN THE HESTIA KNIFE AND EASY TO HANDLE. AMONG THE MORE POWERFUL SECOND-CLASS WEAPONS.
- WELF RECKLESSLY USED UNICORN HORN—A PRECIOUS MATERIAL THAT ALLOWS FOR THE CREATION OF RECOVERY ITEMS—TO FORGE THE KNIFE, WHICH MAKES IT AN EXTRAORDINARILY RARE WEAPON.
- WELF OBTAINED THE HORN DURING THE BATTLE ON DAEDALUS STREET TO RETURN THE XENOS TO THE DUNGEON. WHEN EUNO THE UNICORN CUT OFF THE TIP OF ITS OWN HORN TO LOWER THE CHANCE OF KILLING ANYONE, WELF CLEVERLY GOT THE UNICORN TO GIVE IT TO HIM.
- ORDER-MADE FOR BELL BUT ESTIMATED TO BE WORTH 10,000,000 VALIS.
- IF SOMEONE IS POISONED, THE AILMENT CAN BE COUNTERACTED USING THE KNIFE BLADE.

Afterword

I've always loved the flaming-sword attacks in a certain classic manga.

And here we have the twelfth volume of the series, which begins a new storyline.

I initially planned to start this volume by jumping straight into the story of the tavern elf, but I couldn't help wanting to see just how much our hero had grown since returning to his roots in the epilogue of Volume 11. I therefore rapidly changed my plans and took the liberty of writing a pure Dungeon book. From the perspective of the story as a whole, which is still a long way from over, it's something of a detour, but I'm glad I took it.

As the author, the part of writing this volume that made me happiest is the fact that the characters have reached the stage where they are truly changing and growing. Of course, the structure of the storyline dictates how the various characters develop and grow to a certain extent, but in this volume the main character stepped away from my hand and took a great leap of his own. To borrow the language of the series, even the deities didn't foresee his development. That seems like an appropriate way to put it. This strikes me as evidence that the characters are alive within the story and not at all controlled by my own plans. That's what I want to believe. And to think that at the beginning they were so weak and helpless!

The downside of all this was the question of how to depict the reactions of the women in Bell's life to his slightly excessive growth. In particular, it was quite hard to rein in the sexual attraction of the Amazon. In my first draft, she threw herself onto Bell without taking no for an answer, so I was in quite a panic to revise that. That was another time I realized that the characters are alive.

There were no intrigues or evil plots by the deities in this volume. It was unadulterated Dungeon, and in personal terms, I had a terrific time writing it. The characters were on a pure Dungeon adventure, encountering atrocious monsters and cute girls in this fantasy world. I struggled here and there, but all in all, I was very happy to return,

along with the hero and his companions, to that initial state of enthusiasm.

With that, I would like to move on to acknowledgments.

I am deeply grateful to Kotaki and Editor in Chief Kitamura, who rescued me numerous times when I was moaning with indecision; to Suzuhito Yasuda, who created such beautiful illustrations in the midst of a busy schedule; and to all the other people who supported me once again in this project. Finally, I extend my most sincere thanks to all my readers, who, when I stop to think about it, have now accompanied me through more than twenty volumes of this series. I'll do everything I can to continue bringing you good stories into the future.

I hope we will meet again in the next volume. Until then, good-bye.

Fujino Omori

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